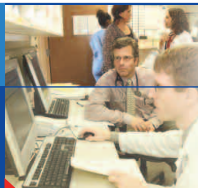


Photo: Steve Schneider

**ATS
FELLOWS
CORNER**



**PICKING A RESEARCH TOPIC
AND FINDING A MENTOR**

Whether you are planning to become a researcher or not, it's important that you have a good research experience during your fellowship. But finding the right mentor and developing the right research question are as much an art as a science.

Q: How and when should fellows begin to make these decisions?

A: "You should really begin thinking about this from Day One of your fellowship," said past ATS president Sharon Rounds, M.D., chief of medical service at the Providence VA, in Rhode Island. "Take every opportunity to hear faculty members make formal presentations about their research and sit down informally with them."

Some fellowship programs set aside time during the first year for fellows to meet potential mentors. "Use this time," said Erin Kross, M.D., a fourth-year fellow at the University of Washington, "to meet with as many people as you can, including those outside your department."

You should even consider working for a brief time in the laboratories that interest as a trial run, added Praveen Akuthota, M.D., a fourth-year fellow at Harvard.

Q: How do you learn about research in other divisions and departments?

A: Dr. Kross believes it's important to speak not only to potential mentors, but also to "senior faculty well-positioned to know what work is being conducted throughout the university." Some of these professors may no longer be conducting research, but they possess a broad view of who is—and may see ways to connect your interests with a researcher working in infectious disease, hematology or transplantation, for instance.

Q: Is it a good idea to do research in another division or department?

A: It can be. "This can be a very positive experience in which the fellow learns state-of-the-art science and brings something new back to the division," explained ATS immediate-past president David Ingbar, M.D., who heads the pulmonary division at the University of Minnesota. But there are risks. "Fellows can get 'lost,' and a basic science mentor may not have appropriate expectations," he cautioned. To avoid this, identify a co-mentor within the Pulmonary/Critical Care/Sleep Division, who can help to ensure you are making steady progress.

Q: Which is more important: the research project or the research mentor?

A: The members interviewed for this column agree that the mentor is at least as important as the project. Some fellows already have extensive research experience, but most do not, so a caring and attentive advisor is particularly important. "Your mentor is going to provide nearly every aspect of support you need to be successful," said Dr. Akuthota. "It's your mentor who keeps your weaknesses from sinking you."

Q: But what makes a good mentor?

A: It depends a lot on your personality. For instance, if you're reticent about asking for help, then you should work with a faculty member who is proactive in finding out how you're doing, advised Dr. Akuthota. "Ultimately, communication is critical to your success."

It's also important to find a mentor who is committed to your being an independent investigator. "Some researchers see fellows as glorified technicians," said Richard Kravitz, M.D., a pediatric pulmonologist at Duke University. "A good mentor will recognize your need to be independent, especially if you're considering a research career."

A good mentor will also make sure you get appropriate credit for the work you have done, added Dr. Rounds.

Q: Who's a better mentor: a seasoned researcher or a junior one?

A: A good way to evaluate a potential mentor is to look at their track record of mentoring other fellows. However, said Dr. Ingbar, a junior faculty member can also be an exceptional mentor. "Rather than working in a large laboratory, you may find yourself working alongside your mentor," he said. "The mentor may be really invested in the research and your success."

Q: What makes a good research project?

A: Because most fellows lack significant research experience and are unsure whether a research career is for them, it's important that projects yield short- and long-term results. "You should probably start with a project that is clinically relevant, has developed techniques and is likely to produce results that you can present at an upcoming conference," said Dr. Ingbar.

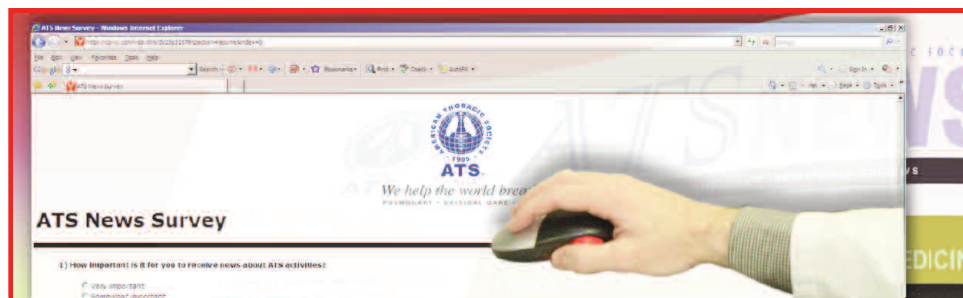
It's easier to hit the ground running, added Angela Rogers, M.D., a fifth-year fellow at Harvard, if the laboratory you choose has access to a population of patients or

blood samples. "It is important to have long-term questions that can form the basis of a grant submission late in your fellowship," she said. "But shorter-term research questions are equally important, so that you can get quick results and some publications during your fellowship time before you apply for funding."

If you already have experience and know that you want to be a researcher, choosing a more challenging project probably makes sense. You'll be embarking on a riskier endeavor—and may not end up with an outcome that is publishable—but you'll more quickly establish yourself as an independent investigator.

Q: How do you take charge of a research project to ensure you get credit for the work?

A: Getting credit isn't something you should worry about until you've got results, according to Dr. Ingbar. "But you can begin to make the project your own by reading the literature and asking questions," he said. "An already published relevant article may suggest additional questions for your own research. That's a good time to sit down with your mentor to discuss your ideas." ■



Survey Says: Members Like ATS News

The ATS recently asked its members for their feedback about the design and content of the *ATS News*. Of the nearly 1,000 members who responded to the e-mail survey, more than 90 percent said that getting news from the ATS is important to them. A majority also indicated that they prefer to receive the publication electronically, rather than by mail.

The anonymous survey asked respondents which existing sections of the newsletter they find most interesting. Eighty-six percent of those surveyed said they are either very interested or interested in news about ATS statements and guidelines. Eighty-four percent indicated that they are interested in articles highlighting the ATS journals and the annual International Conference. And 70 percent said they were interested in "Research in Brief," a new section launched last year.

"The *ATS News* keeps me abreast of the goings-on of the ATS in a very user-friendly, easily readable format," said one respondent. "It provides just enough information on a topic, at least for my needs."

Not everyone is pleased, however. Some said that the *ATS News* does not appeal to a wide enough audience—and want to see the publication to increase its coverage of news of interest to those outside of academia.

A number of members also find the electronic version of the newsletter difficult to read. To address this issue, the ATS has begun posting the newsletter as a PDF that can be downloaded and printed from the ATS Web site, rather than as a Macromedia Flash file. The editors are also working to make the monthly message that highlights stories of interest more concise.

The Society will use these comments and suggestions to further improve the *ATS News* so that it better meets the diverse needs of ATS members. Over the next year, the editors will work to make the e-newsletter as comprehensive, user-friendly and interactive as possible.

Among the new features that will be launched in 2009 are a question-and-answer "Practice Trends" column and a podcast series. Later this year, the Society will also introduce an HTML-only version of the publication, for those who do not wish to open links to the PDF.

The editors will also work to expand the publication's focus, and include more news of interest to pediatric pulmonologists, sleep specialists, nurses and other allied healthcare professionals, as well as those in private practice and pulmonary rehabilitation—areas that respondents felt were underrepresented.