Many general practitioners have difficulty finding time to read medical literature either widely or regularly. Deciding how much of the time available should be allotted to reading medical newspapers, how much to journals about general practice, and how much to topics of more general medical interest is a further problem. However, what is read is mainly received by post and easily accessible. The doctor with a research interest has to face two extra problems: he has to find more time to read in depth on the subject of his choice and now has to search out what he needs rather than simply filter what he is offered.

Although all would agree that reading is an important part of the early stages of research, there are different views on how much should be done and when it should be done. Some read early to determine what course their research should follow and others, of whom I am one, read later to check that a developing idea is on reasonable lines. The advantage of the first approach is that reading is undertaken with an open mind and the risks of repeating previous work are reduced; the advantage of the second approach is that it reduces the risk of being ‘conditioned’ by what others have done and led away from an original and personal line of thought. Both schools would agree that too much reading may become a distraction from actually doing research and that too little reading may unnecessarily limit the investigator’s ability to make a useful contribution to his chosen field. Both schools would also agree that although reading should normally guide the research worker towards making a new contribution to his subject, it may sometimes be justifiable to repeat work already reported especially if the method of the previous study seems suspect or the results surprising.

This chapter discusses several complementary ways of searching the literature. Exploratory reading covers the simple preliminary review essential for any research project and allows for the limited time and possibly limited facilities available to general practitioners trying to combine research and service work. Exploratory reading should be a part of the early stages of developing a research idea and will usually
Reading the literature

precede or immediately follow preliminary discussions of the idea with any colleagues who have been approached for advice. Comprehensive reading discusses the methods of obtaining a wider cover of the literature and might be regarded as an optional, though desirable, extra. The chapter ends with some advice on making reference lists and reference files.

EXPLORATORY READING

My first recommendation is to start simply and to extend the scope of the review if early results are encouraging. *The Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners (JRCGP)* usually forms my own starting point for a search of general practice literature. Take the most recent year’s bound volume available (or the equivalent in loose monthly journals together with the index) and turn to the index which will be found at either the back or the front of the volume. The *JRCGP* index lists references under both author and topic and, when there are several authors, lists each author separately. Start with the subject heading. If, for example, the theme being reviewed is ‘workload’, check this heading first; identify possible headings for cross-references or related references. In a review of literature on workload these could include ‘home visits’, ‘night visits’ and ‘practice organization’. Depending on the particular interest being explored, other headings such as ‘repeat prescribing’ and ‘telephone – use of’ or alternatively ‘morbidity’ or ‘immigrant populations’ might also be of interest. Depending on the number of references this first check produces, repeat the exercise for the previous year. Be willing to go back about five years to begin with and aim to collect between a dozen and twenty references.

Once completed, take these four or five volumes to a quiet part of the library – or home if lending rules allow – and look up and read the references carefully. Make notes on postcards or on a loose-leaf pad. Note the authors’ names and where the work was done; make a judgement on the quality of the work, on its usefulness and on its relevance to your own idea; would the method used fit your opportunities? Could you develop further the idea reported? Do you believe the results reported? Do you agree with the interpretation of the results? Has the discussion missed an important point? And finally, note the references quoted.

In this way your list of references will mount quickly. Do not feel guilty at building on someone else’s efforts – that is part of the healthy chain reaction of research and progress. Within an hour or two, or an evening or two, it should be possible to answer a few basic questions