A journal club can be defined as a group of individuals who meet regularly to discuss articles in current medical literature. Journal clubs are an internationally recognized teaching tool in postgraduate medical education and time-honored tradition for learning the latest in medical research and teaching of critical appraisal skills.

The earliest reference to a journal club is found in the biography of Sir James Paget during the period of 1835-1854, it described a group of students meeting in a room over a baker's shop near St. Bartholomew's Hospital to read journals or play cards. However, it is Cushing's description of Sir William Osler, a physician with an interest in medical education, founded a journal club at McGill University, Montreal in 1875 and later at Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore that is usually credited as the first report of such an organization in North America. His book and journal clubs were designed to review the latest medical research and provide a forum for club members to recommend new periodicals for the hospital library.

The aims and goals have certainly changed from those earlier times. Lifelong learning is essential in today's world, with the rapid explosion of knowledge and technology. Busy doctors have never had time to read all the journals on their disciplines and it is nearly impossible to keep up-to-date by reading journals on an individual basis. Hence, journal clubs help keep members abreast about current literature, especially research-based papers. Use of the group forum helps members to gain insights to what they may have missed during their own review. Critical appraisal of research-based articles is an area which can affect clinical practice by providing new ideas and strategies, justifying current policies and practice, and providing a theoretical basis for current practice and decision-making.

The knowledge and skills needed for critical appraisal of literature and practice of evidence based medicine (EBM) are often taught through courses and workshops in classrooms away from clinical practice. However, without reinforcement in subsequent practice, even the modest knowledge gained from such courses are likely to deteriorate overtime. In fact, teaching and learning that is integrated into routine practice should bring greater benefits. Where resources and facilities are available, such teaching can form part of a ward rounds. If the provisions for real time teaching are not available, this goal can be accomplished in the setting of journal club.

In the beginning, regular journal clubs helped students to keep themselves abreast with the medical literature. Later, it provided an opportunity to improve acquisition of knowledge in clinical epidemiology, biostatistics, study designs and teaching critical appraisal skills. Studies have showed that journal clubs promote critical thinking, reading habits and strengthening of collegial relationship. In addition, the journal club activity has also been advocated to fill the gap between research and practice, hence facilitating better practice of evidence-based medicine which directly results in better patient care.

Different factors have been associated with effective journal club practice including clear learning objectives, a designated club leader, compulsory attendance of trainee with regular attendance of faculty members, formal teaching of critical appraisal skills, high value given by residency program director, small residents group (<12), incorporation of adult learning principles and the use of structured checklist for article under review and provision of free food. Common reasons for discontinuing journal clubs appear to be lack of time, inadequate preparation, lack of goals, interests or participation.

Formation and regular running of journal clubs is an area in which clinicians especially trainees should be encouraged. Numerous guidelines are available for running a journal club. Members can belong to the same professional background or come from diverse backgrounds promote the exchange of different perspectives. After the group is formed, the roles of its members must be identified so they know their responsibilities. If members are familiar with article critiquing then it is a bonus, but this can be remedied at the first meeting by selecting an article that describes how to critique other articles. Moderator is responsible for maintaining openness, equality, and a non-threatening atmosphere.

Latest updates should always be learnt and referred to original articles not from the text books which are
usually couple of years old when published. Journal club also serves this purpose by involving trainees in the latest research articles. Many trainees even after acquiring their fellowship still do not know how to write a scientific paper. Writing dissertation is an exercise which is not enjoyed by many trainees. By involving them in journal clubs, they develop a habit of reading and critical appraisal of articles. This enhances their understanding of research and how to write paper for peer reviewed journals.

Currently, in our country, the existence of journal clubs in postgraduate medical education is unreported. Only few institutions have their regular journal club with mandatory attendance. Although CPSP had included journal club section in the trainee log book but the trainees as well as many supervisors were not very well-aware about its importance as a training tools for research, critical appraisal and learning medical writing. There is an urgent need that journal clubs should be established in every training institute. Formal training through workshops and CMEs should be arranged about how to conduct effective journal club meetings.

In addition, trainees should be educated so that they can utilize journal clubs effectively. A section should be included in the ‘Research Methodology and Biostatistics workshop’ regarding use of critical appraisal in journal clubs. These measures will not only help in developing research attitude in postgraduate trainees but also encourage them to conduct studies and write more scientific papers, which is the main objective of these workshops.

All those institutions/departments which do not have a journal club at the moment can take the following steps to initiate this useful academic activity.

- Identify a leader. This should be someone who is willing and committed to the concept.
- Identify the goals. Initially, a worthy goal is to critique one article as a group so that sharing and discussion about how to critique a research article can develop.
- Then setup a convenient meeting time and location.

The time should be chosen so that all members are present and able to pay their full attention.
- All members should receive a copy of the research article and the critiques before the meeting.
- Encourage active participation by using discussion questions.
- Evaluate the journal club. One way to do this is by gathering feedback from participants at the end of the session.

REFERENCES