Community-Oriented Integrated Care

Medical students' attitudes towards general practice and factors affecting career choice: a questionnaire study

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Key message

- Recruitment to general practice is a significant current challenge. The Department of Health is aiming to recruit 50% of all graduates to general practice; however, far fewer graduates intend to become general practitioners (GPs) opting instead for hospital specialities.
- In the changing climate of general practice reform, we need to know what students' current attitudes towards general practice are.
- Medical students in this study have a positive and realistic idea about general practice, but only 13% of students in the study rank GP as their first choice career.
- Further evaluation as to why students do not consider a career in general practice is needed.

Why this matters to us

The challenge to general practice recruitment is of great current media and research interest. Recently, the GP Taskforce Report (2014) also suggested that more research was needed into factors that influence medical student's career choices in order to address the recruitment crisis.¹ Imperial College London is a large well-established medical school with

an emphasis on academic and scientific achievement – however, like other London medical schools, uptake to general practice is lower than the national average. We have been particularly interested in studying current medical students' attitudes towards general practice and future career choices.

Given that interest in the field was the most important factor in determining career choice in our study, we feel that it is vital to persuade students early on that general practice can be a stimulating and rewarding career with numerous opportunities for specialist interests and front-line medical care. For example, we are based in a thriving primary care research department with both academic general practitioner (GP) training schemes and a new innovative vocational training scheme based in our department. However, we wonder if students may not recognise the potential for academia within our speciality. In order to recruit a motivated and enthusiastic future workforce, we have an obligation to portray general practice to medical students as the diverse, challenging speciality that it is. We hope this study will inspire readers who contribute greatly to the education of medical students to consider what we can do collectively to boost the profile of our speciality.

ABSTRACT

Background The current issue of general practice recruitment is a significant challenge and concern. In order to address this, it is vital to understand medical students' attitudes towards general practice and what influences their choice of intended career.

Method We used a questionnaire study to examine these attitudes across all years at Imperial College Medical School and to understand what a group of London medical students' current intended career choices were.

Results We found that only 13% of students ranked general practice as their first choice career despite having a generally realistic and positive attitude towards the speciality. They highlighted

that the main influence on future career choice was interest in the specific speciality and that lifestyle factors did not seem to be so important.

Conclusion Exposure to general practice, primary care research and student GP societies might play some part in increasing interest, but more work is needed to understand why students are rejecting general practice and what we can do collectively to attract students into choosing a career in primary care.

Keywords: attitudes, career choices, medical students

Introduction

The Department of Health has recommended that 50% of medical graduates become general practitioners (GPs) by 2015. However, a survey of newly qualified doctors' career intentions shows a far different trajectory, with only 28% showing an intention to pursue a career in primary care.²

In order to address the issues of recruitment to general practice, we must understand medical students' attitudes towards general practice and GPs and what influences these attitudes.¹ Medical students' opinions are particularly relevant as doctors are applying to specific speciality training schemes soon after qualification.³

Doctors rejecting general practice as a speciality tended to cite reasons such as job content and too much administration.⁴ One study found that junior doctors perceived general practice negatively and as a career with less clinical interest, but a better lifestyle.⁵

However, a study at Imperial College Medical School in 2002 showed that students had a positive attitude towards general practice.⁶ There have been significant changes in the NHS and, therefore, we felt that we needed to understand what current students' attitudes towards general practice are.

The aim of our study was to determine medical students' attitudes towards general practice at a large London medical school (Imperial College), what influences their intended choice of career, and to establish what their current career intentions are using a structured questionnaire. By understanding medical students' current opinions we may be able to suggest strategies for increasing the number of students who opt for a career in general practice.

Methods

Questionnaire design

This was a cross-sectional structured questionnaire study to enable us to sample as many students as possible between September 2013 and January 2014. The questionnaire was developed after literature review and presentation at an international medical education conference, and explored five separate domains given in Figure 1. The domains selected were in keeping with key attitudinal constructs that emerged in focus groups looking at what influenced medical students attitudes towards general practice at Imperial College in 2002.⁶

Figure 1 Cross-sectional study questionnaire.

The questionnaire was then piloted in a group of 30 newly qualified doctors and 20 first-year students.

The questionnaire used a 6-point Likert scale. There was no middle response in order to encourage participants to commit to a degree of agreement or disagreement to the attitude statements in the three domains; characteristics of general practice, general practice versus hospital speciality and influences on perception of general practice.

Sampling

Because of guidance from the ethics committee we were unable to email students directly. We therefore used convenience sampling as we were permitted to visit seminars to recruit students; students who volunteered were sent a link to the online survey and were entered into a draw to win a book token. We visited three seminars (of up to 25 students) for each year group that the GP department teaches (Years 1, 3, 5 and 6) and we were able to promote the survey with minimum disruption to the scheduled teaching. Therefore, we had limited access to students in the second year and the BSc year (Year 4). While Years 1–5 had not undertaken a substantial placement in general practice at this stage of the year, Year 6 had all completed a placement.

Data collection

We used an online survey tool (Survey Monkey) to collect our data. To maintain anonymity, students' email addresses and identifiable data were not stored.

Results

Demographics

One hundred and nineteen students signed up to receive the survey link and 66 students completed the survey, giving a 55% response rate. Sixty-one percent (40/66) of those completing the survey were female and 39% (26/66) were male; the current demographic of Imperial College students is 50% male and 50% female. Ethnicity was similar to current university data. Only 20% of students had a degree prior to starting medicine. The majority of students were unmarried and within the age group 21–25 years.

Characteristics of general practice

The pooled Likert scale averages are represented in Figure 2. To the right of the arrow shows agreement with the statement. The students were in agreement that general practice emphasised continuity of care and played an important role in health promotion. Students tended to disagree with the statements that general practice was not intellectually stimulating and concerned with only simple acute problems.

Comparing working as a GP with a hospital specialist

Students disagreed that it was more prestigious to work as a GP and that GPs were academically weaker at medical school (Figure 3).

Figure 2 Characteristics of general practice.

Figure 3 Working as a GP compared with working as a hospital specialist in the UK.

Figure 4 Influences on perceptions of general practice.

Influences on perceptions of GPs

GPs encountered in medical school were the strongest influence on students' perceptions of general practice (Figure 4).

Students were asked 'Are there any other influences on your perception of general practice?'

Three free-text responses were given and are displayed verbatim as follows:

We had very little exposure to GP during preclinical years (approximately two sessions) – I'm glad this is changing in clinical studies ... as I believe seeing primary care directly shows how varied the work done by GPs can be. (Year 3 student)

My own experience doing GP placements. (Year 6 student)

Medical careers articles describing life as a GP, the training process, etc. (Year 5 student)

Influences and current career choice

In the second part of the survey, students were asked to rank factors in order of influence with regards to their current career choice (Figure 5). ‘Own interest in the field’ was the most highly ranked factor in determining career choice, but there were no other clear patterns.

In the free-text section of this part of the survey, students were asked ‘Were there any other factors affecting your choice of speciality?’

Two researchers independently analysed the free-text responses to the question and arrived at two similar themes: (1) practicalities of training, e.g. duration of training and options for part-time working; and (2) interest and exposure (student’s work experience or prior exposure to the field).

Current first choice career

Thirteen percent (8/62) of students placed general practice as a first choice career, 2% were not sure and

85% opted for hospital specialities at this point (Figure 6).

Looking at second and third choice options, 53% (33/62) placed GP within the top three choices. This group was comprised of 64% (24/37) females and 36% (9/25) males. Seventy percent (13/19) of Year 6 students put general practice in their top 3, compared with 39% (19/46) of students for those years that had little or no exposure to general practice.

Discussion

Summary of findings

Our results suggest that these students have a positive attitude towards general practice and a realistic idea about what general practice entails. The greatest influence on their perceptions of general practice was through their exposure to GPs at medical school.

However, despite this positive view of the speciality, students did not commit themselves to GP careers, with only 13% of our sample ranking general practice as their first choice speciality compared with 28% nationally.²

Figure 5 Influences on career choice.

Figure 6 Current first choice career.

Our study showed that influences on medical students' intended career choices appear to be varied but that interest in the specific speciality area ranked highest. Interestingly, in contrast to previous research, aspects such as pay and family life did not seem to strongly influence career choice at this stage.⁴

Enthusiasm for the speciality

Although students' experience of general practice was positive, it was not enough to commit them to the speciality as a future career; an observation also seen at other medical schools.⁷ 'Interest in the field' is the greatest influence on future career choices and as such this may be a more important area to recruit students to careers in general practice. A recent discussion considered how students' perceptions of a career in general practice might be influenced by engaging students in ways outside the standard curriculum, such as establishing GP societies to promote general practice.⁸

Exposure to GP as a key career influencer

Our findings suggest that the more exposure students have to general practice, the more likely they are to choose it as an intended career. Students at this medical school are less exposed to general practice during their training, with 7% of the curriculum taught by GPs compared with approximately 12% at medical schools nationally.^{9,10}

The Royal College of General Practitioners has suggested that medical schools could be incentivised to produce more GPs by increasing the proportion of community-based teaching in medical school curricula; a feature of the curriculum of newer medical schools which have had greater success in producing GPs. However, increasing exposure alone without retaining

quality is likely to be detrimental to students' experience of general practice.^{5,11}

Our survey also showed that students were unsure whether a career in general practice provides academic opportunities and may feel that academia is under-represented in general practice compared with other specialities, despite a variety of successful primary care research units based in London universities and academic GP training schemes.

GP as a career decision

Although students may not necessarily favour general practice as their top choice career, a large number of them will ultimately become GPs.

Our own survey showed that it was not until Year 6, that the majority of Imperial College students (70%) would consider general practice in their top three career choices. A study looking at medical graduates' career choices shows that only 50% of GPs had chosen their speciality in Year 1 and that the speciality attracted a large number of doctors that had not initially chosen general practice.¹² Reassuringly, GP job satisfaction levels appear to be high among both late and early choosers.¹³

Students may have unrealistic expectations about available jobs which, to date, they have viewed through the lens of being attached to tertiary London teaching hospitals. It has been suggested that medical schools must assume greater responsibility for informing students about the reality of workforce requirements so that they have realistic expectations about their future careers.⁴

Limitations

Recruitment of students to complete the questionnaire was opportunistic because of ethics constraints. The relatively small sample size in one medical school

means that these results cannot necessarily be extrapolated to represent all medical students across the range of medical schools. The questionnaire was completed on a voluntary basis and responder bias must be considered. Our response rate of 55% was also low and reflects issues with how we were able to approach students and recruit them to the project.

Future research

It would be interesting to look at influences and career choices at other medical schools in order to understand the differences seen in the numbers of students intending to follow a career in general practice. In addition, understanding why certain students do not ever consider a career in general practice may provide us with an insight into how we may be able to engage with this group in the future.

Implications of study

Our findings suggest that at one 'traditional' London medical school, few students regard general practice as a first choice career option, which suggests that we are falling far short of the 50% target for graduates. Some strategies have been suggested, such as redesigning the curriculum to give students more exposure to the diversity of general practice. By engaging students early in their career, we may be able to increase enthusiasm for the speciality.

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ETHICAL APPROVAL

Full ethics approval was sought and granted by the Imperial College Medical Ethics Committee (December 2012, revised July 2013).

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