

Characteristics of career advisors for general practice

A qualitative study of UK GPs

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BACKGROUND

Career support needs of general practitioners are poorly described in the literature.

METHOD

Semi-structured interviews of 26 practising GPs from two United Kingdom counties.

RESULTS

General practitioners believed they would benefit from the provision of career advice and guidance provided by trained peers. They were looking for advisors to whom they could relate and who understood their professional and personal needs, in particular: listening skills, life experience, credibility, protected time, ability to challenge, give careful consideration, trustworthiness, knowledge about GP careers, facilitation skills, and empathy.

DISCUSSION

A strategy put in place in Australia might enable GPs to implement career plans.

Family life and personal fulfilment play an important role in determining where doctors choose to work.¹⁻⁴ Our understanding of these reasons is far from complete.^{5,6} Certainly general practitioners' career expectations are changing.⁷ Many no longer assume they will continue to stay in the same job for life, either in place or vocation.⁸ Perhaps career planning should be introduced to: help appropriate decisions,^{9,10} provide assistance with balancing work and private life,¹¹ and for planning retirement. Such advice is difficult to find in Australia; as it is in the United Kingdom.¹²⁻¹⁴

A new national system of appraisal has been introduced in the UK in which all GPs undergo annual formative, confidential, and supportive review of their work with a peer in a nearby practice. Although designed to improve clinical performance, this process could also provide career support.

We wondered what characteristics GPs thought any future advisors should have.

Methods

All practising GPs in Shropshire and Staffordshire (797) were invited by letter to take part. Those who replied

with written consent were interviewed in person by (one of the authors) with a semi-structured questionnaire for 30–60 minutes during (northern) spring 2004. We asked about any experiences of career support, and identified characteristics they would value in a person providing it. Interview transcripts were analysed thematically and by theory generation.

Results

The response rate was 26/797 (3%). Respondents were 62% male, from rural or semi-rural settings, aged 30–59 years. Thirteen GPs had additional commitments outside the practice, 11 were involved in training doctors, and 14 of the study GPs were themselves appraisers.

General practitioners interviewed had little or no career advice. One exception was a GP who had sought such advice while entering medicine. They nominated characteristics that they thought any future career advisors should have (*Table 1*). Some felt that the careers advisor needed to be contactable in office hours. Approachability, accessibility, caution and imagination were important. Good communication was very important, especially specific communication skills such as asking questions, reflecting back to the individual, challenging, and probing. They should be supportive and offer guidance to assist the

individual in personal development, as well as career development, and have the capacity to see things from several points of view. Other important characteristics included respect for the person, accuracy, honesty and trustworthiness, and credibility in terms of their age and, if not in general practice careers themselves, with at least a broad understanding of it. There needs to be time for careers support, perhaps during professional appraisal.

Discussion

Only a small number of GPs volunteered to take part, which may bias their representativeness. However, we sought only to determine the range of issues rather than their frequency. Also, anticipating value in characteristics for some possible future experience may not be valid. This only could be solved if such practice becomes introduced. Nor can we know if British views can be extrapolated to Australia: professionally there are differences as well as

similarities. Nevertheless, these views might be useful in any future establishment of such a service.

Implications for general practice

What we already know:

- GPs value careers information, advice and guidance.
- Such support is rarely available in Australia.

What this study showed:

- GPs valued access to well informed support from trained peers to help them manage their careers.
- Regular formative review with well informed peers might be ideal.

Conflict of interest: this study was commissioned by the Workforce Development Directorate. They had no involvement in the design, conduct or writing up of the work.

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Table 1. Selected representative comments from respondents about qualities of would be career advisors

Credibility: knowledge and experience

- ... credibility is important
- Someone who has been there and done it, experienced the options, preferably found positive ways through it
- ... would need to have a 'background' knowledge about different career options in medicine. So... a lot of background knowledge about length of training, how to train, what qualifications you need

Facilitation, listening skills and empathy, probing and challenging

- A very good listener and very good at asking open ended questions, which makes you think
- ... makes people reflect more on career options... makes you think about ways of improving things
- ... doesn't go along with everything you say but needs to see where you are coming from. For example, you say you want to become this, is it because you want to become that or is it a dream? It's about challenging
- ... (asking) 'Where do you want to be in 5 years?' And knowing you want to be there, 'How are you going to get there?'
- Listening and hearing, tease things out and explore the things that people touch on to try to decide those which are important or throwaway remarks
- You have to get the engagement, trust, active listening, ability to reflect, ability to hear what's been said. Look at what people are avoiding in conversation, look at when and why they change the subject