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Enhancing the choice of general practice as a career

Background

The shortage of general practitioners in Australia is likely to continue unless more doctors choose general practice as a career. The aim of this qualitative research was to explore the factors that influence students' and junior doctors' career choice, particularly in respect to choosing general practice.

Methods

Medical students, junior doctors, general practice registrars and GPs were recruited and interviewed. The interviews were semistructured, transcribed and analysed by theme.

Results

Themes from the 38 interviews included the experience of general practice during training, the impact of the postgraduate general practice placements program, and factors that make general practice attractive or unattractive as a career choice.

Discussion

There are a number of factors that contribute to medical students' and junior doctors' career choice. Attention needs to be paid to the quality of the general practice learning experience and general practice posts in the early postgraduate years, and the attractions of general practice should be promoted.

■ **There is likely to be a shortage of general practitioners in Australia well beyond 2012,¹ when recent increases in medical student numbers will lead to an increase in the number of qualified doctors. However, the shortage will only be alleviated if a high proportion of these doctors choose to enter general practice. This is even more imperative as GPs increasingly choose to work fewer hours.² Additionally, the number of vacancies in rural and remote areas will not be filled by the current number of newcomers to the general practice workforce.³**

The wide variation in the number of graduates from different medical schools choosing to enter general practice training suggests that undergraduate experience affects career choice.⁴ This article explores the factors that influence students and junior doctors to choose or reject a general practice career, and is the qualitative component of a literature synthesis on workforce choice among health professionals.⁵

Methods

This qualitative study was developed to explore whether the findings of the literature review mirrored the opinions of current students and doctors in respect to factors affecting their choice of a career in general practice; therefore, a large sample was not sought, and interviews were restricted to 13 medical students (three male), five junior doctors (two male), five general practice registrars (three male) and 15 GPs (eight male). Three of the junior doctors had undertaken a Prevocational General Practice Placement Program (PGPPP) term.

The interviewees were recruited through:

- *FridayFax* (the weekly bulletin of The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners)
- the University of Sydney medical student electronic notice board
- emails to GPs with University of Sydney medical students in their practices
- a medical educator contact at James Cook University Medical School who sought volunteers from medical students and junior doctors at Mackay Base Hospital (Queensland)

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- a regional training provider medical educator to recruit PGPPP doctors.

The semistructured phone interviews were audiotaped and transcribed, and the questions were based on the literature findings⁵ to explore their correlation with the views of a sample of Australian students and doctors.

Questions explored factors relating to career choice in general, and general practice in particular, including positive and negative influences on choice. The questions were not piloted but were adapted and refined in each interview depending on the answers and experience of the interviewee.

Results

Themes and subcodes which emerged from the interviews are shown in *Table 1*.

Factors affecting career choice – role models

Role models encountered during medical school and postqualification are important influences on career choice. This has important implications.

'I think the biggest influence is seeing good role models'.
(Medical student 1)

General practice exposure

Recent graduates and medical students have more exposure to general practice than doctors who graduated more than 5 years ago; some students felt that quality rather than quantity of exposure to general practice was important.

'I actually think my medical school has super saturated me with general practice, probably if I had less exposure and better quality exposure I'd feel more open to the idea of general practice'. (Junior doctor 3)

The interviewees also stressed the importance of early exposure to general practice. While current medical students believe they have plenty of general practice experience, they want this experience to involve hands-on practice rather than observation. General practitioners should also have a high profile in medical school and be involved in teaching throughout the course.

'But whereas you've never seen general practice and how they actually operate...so I think people... are interested in other specialties because of exposure to them, whereas we're not exposed to general practice so if we were maybe earlier on in the course it might be more attractive'.
(Medical student 5)

There are often negative views of general practice expressed during hospital terms by hospital doctors, though not necessarily with specific reasons.

'I guess during my resident years I was steered away from really entering a career in general practice because general practice was somehow seen as... an inferior type of choice'.
(Registrar 1)

'I feel like they don't get a lot of respect from the rest of the medical profession especially from what I've seen in my clinical exposure in hospitals, certainly a lot of specialists don't have a lot of time for GPs'. (Medical student 7)

Exposure to quality general practice experiences should give students realistic expectations of the job. Conversely, a poorly rated general practice attachment is harmful to a student's perception, particularly if the GP shows signs of burnout.

'I think overall... when I started med I wasn't thinking that seriously about general practice, I was probably just thinking more of the glory... but my exposure to it has probably made it seem like a much more positive career choice with flexibility and variety and the chance to actually make a real difference to people'. (Medical student 7)

The PGPPP gives postgraduate year 1 and 2 doctors opportunities to work in general practice for 3–4 months. The emerging evidence of the PGPPP's effect on career choice was confirmed by those interviewees who had been through the program.

'I wasn't very seriously considering general practice as a long term career but once I did it as an intern kind of it moved up my list of preferences if that makes sense'.
(Junior doctor 4)

'Well I think that for the ones that have come through the program so far there's been a definite shift toward choosing general practice as a career'. (GP 12)

The attractions of general practice as a career

Reasons given for considering choosing general practice included continuity of care, the range of patients and conditions, stimulating patient-doctor interactions, the skill mix (including procedural work), the ability to practise holistic care, lifestyle, and autonomy. Flexible working hours and career path are also important.

'It appeals mainly because of lifestyle issues, because I want to have a family'. (Medical student 3)

'If you are in an appropriate environment you're able to be reasonably procedural as well... which appeals to me, I'm a kind of hands-on person'. (Medical student 8)

Table 1. Themes identified

Theme family	Subcode
Factors affecting career choice in general (medical students and junior doctors only)	Medical education still mainly hospital based
	General practice seen as inferior choice during education
	Role models
General practice exposure at medical school and for junior doctors	Comparison of general practice with hospital
	Effect of general practice attachments
	Generalist versus specialist
	Having general practice exposure earlier during training
	More stimulating than expected
	Needs hands-on experience not just observation
	Perceptions of general practice while a student
	Sell general practice as a great job
	Prevocational General Practice Placements Program
The attractions of general practice as a career	Continuity of care
	Flexibility and hours
	Lifestyle
	Stimulating and lots of variety
	Working with people
	Autonomy
	Prestige
	Skill mix
	Social status
Making general practice more attractive as a career option	Holistic care
	Increase flexibility
	Reduce government interference
	Better communication between GPs
	Pay
	Portray as enjoyable career
	Doing procedures
	Enhanced recognition of GPs
	More support
	Less time pressure
	Students to gain better understanding of role
Increase availability of part time training	
What makes general practice unattractive?	Lack of support
	Not intellectually challenging
	Lack of time with patients
	Negative media coverage
	Lack of prestige
General practice teaching	Enjoyable to have students in practice
	General practitioners not trained to teach
	Remuneration factors
	Increases status
Teamwork and effects on choice	Attractions of interprofessional teams
	Lack of training in teamwork
	Team as support
	Teamwork important
Effects of rural attachments	Compulsory rural term
	Reasons for being rural GP
	Hard work

Making general practice even more attractive

Interviewees want less bureaucracy, better communication with other GPs and greater recognition of their role. Greater flexibility (including flexibility of the vocational training program), support, remuneration and the ability to perform procedures are also important.

'Setting up a practice, assisting with administrative things if there (are) these things in place where it wasn't just me running a business or having to make sure everything is running, you know, where I was principally doing the job of a doctor and not an administrator and a small business owner, then I think there would be more incentive'. (Medical student 1)

'If the training program was a lot simpler'. (Registrar 3)

What makes general practice unattractive?

Interviewees mentioned lack of support, lack of time with patients and the decreasing prestige of general practice as a career path as factors which reduced the attractiveness of general practice. Students stated that general practice is not seen as a specialty or as intellectually challenging. Negative role models and media coverage enhance the view of general practice as a poor choice.

'I know that... most specialties, the amount of time you can spend with a patient is restrictive, but I felt particularly in general practice often that the time really was limited and you often couldn't spend as long with a patient as the patient really needed or you wanted to spend with them'. (Medical student 10)

'I think it could help if the profession talked publicly and privately about the positive aspects of the career instead of a relentless focus on the negative aspects of the job'. (GP 13)

'Whenever there is a discussion about health matters the image on television is usually of an operating theatre, as if it's the only place that matters that important work gets done there. I think there is a public image aspect to this'. (GP 1)

General practitioners as teachers

Given the obvious importance of good GP role models, there is a need for good GP teachers who involve students actively in patient interactions rather than placing the student as a passive observer. General practitioners are drawn to teaching because it is enjoyable and increases their status. However, the interviewees expressed dissatisfaction about the level of remuneration.

'But I have to admit it [teaching] is very onerous, I've actually pulled out of some of the attachments that I've said I would do this year just because it is too onerous and the remuneration is appalling'. (GP 6)

The effects of rural attachments

The students highlighted the importance of quality attachments and experiences as important factors in choice; this was also the case for rural attachments.

'Rural doctors and rural patients act differently than their

city counterparts, so in part the appeal of the rural general practice term was possibly that it was rural but also I think I saw things about general practice that I hadn't, that I hadn't realised were part of it'. (Medical student 8)

'The suburban one really didn't, didn't really turn me on to general practice at all... there were a variety of reasons for that, but like I said, my rural experience was fantastic'. (Medical student 8)

Discussion

A common discussion point was the changing nature of general practice and the lifestyle aspirations of GPs. Many GPs no longer choose to work full time, and the flexibility of working hours is attractive for doctors and influences medical students' choice.⁶ The potential to vary hours and the diversity of the workload should therefore be highlighted as major attractions of general practice.

One way to reduce doctors' working hours is to enhance team based care, with an expanded role for practice nurses. This would require different funding models and additional training.

General practice and rural attachments must be major features of medical school programs and intern years, but it is important to have students and junior doctors 'do the job' rather than simply observing.⁷

Quantity should not be delivered at the expense of quality. Being able to experience working as a GP is an important feature of the PGPPP, and this type of junior doctor experience has been shown to influence career choice in the United Kingdom.⁸ Working GPs need to advertise the merits of their jobs and help dismiss the notion that they are 'just a GP'.

Procedural work is important for potential male GPs, especially when considering a rural career,⁹ while flexibility is attractive for women in urban as well as rural areas.^{4,10}

While hospital based and acute care may seem to represent the exciting side of medical practice, and managing chronic disease in the community the less attractive option, the diversity and breadth of general practice should appeal to doctors wanting autonomy within patient care. The chance to build up longstanding and meaningful patient-doctor relationships is one of the hallmarks of general practice that students do not always appreciate in their short attachments.

Limitations of this study

This study made no attempt to recruit a truly representative sample of interviewees, given that the purpose was to triangulate the findings of the literature review⁵ with the views of a selection of stakeholders. Their views were similar to the conclusions drawn from the 198 papers reviewed, of which 57 were from Australia.

However, because these views are contemporaneous and include more insight from the PGPPP perspective, we believe they add richness to the findings of the review; in particular, the fact that the interviewees cite similar negative factors to previous work suggests that change is still needed to rectify the workforce problem.

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