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Who will be running your practice in 10 years?

Supporting GP registrars' awareness and knowledge of practice ownership

Background

With a declining Australian general practice workforce, succession planning for practice owners is a pertinent concern. Limited previous research and anecdotal evidence suggests there is minimal interest from general practice registrars in practice ownership.

Objective

We conducted a web based survey to investigate the interest of general practice registrars in the Australian Capital Territory and southeast New South Wales in practice ownership, perceived barriers to becoming an owner-operator, and preferred educational activities on this subject.

Discussion

We found more interest in practice ownership than previous research suggests. Insufficient knowledge, workload, bureaucracy and finance issues were perceived as barriers to ownership. The registrars favourably rated mentoring, release workshops, and an extended skills post as educational activities through which they prefer to attain skills in this field. Further investigation into effective practice ownership education delivery is warranted.

Keywords

health services, education, medical; general practice; vocational education/graduate education

Australia has a dwindling general practitioner workforce considered insufficient to meet primary care needs. This is projected to worsen over the next 5–10 years, contributed to by an ageing workforce considering retirement.^{1–3} While approximately 25% of GPs were aged over 55 years in 2003 workforce analyses,^{1,2} by 2011 this had risen to over 40%.⁴ Concurrently, there are a declining number of private practices, with 8% fewer in 2002 compared to 1995.¹ This trend is related to increased corporatisation and reluctance of younger GPs to invest in practice ownership.¹ This highlights the need for effective succession planning, and empowering the next generation with the skills necessary to be practice owner-operators.^{5–7}

No data exists regarding who takes over ownership and clinical leadership when established practice principals retire. Anecdotally, it is difficult to find a successor in the current climate of primary healthcare.¹ In our region (the Australian Capital Territory and southeastern New South Wales), less than 1% of recently fellowed general practice registrars have gone on to become owner-operators within 10 years. Only one Australian study¹ has previously investigated registrar interest in practice ownership. In 2003–04, the Australian National Health Workforce Secretariat held consultations with GPs, registrars and consumers to investigate the GP workforce. In one registrar focus group, discussions on career intentions confirmed the observed decline in private practice ownership, and none of the

registrar participants expressed a desire to own their own practice.¹ Buying into or establishing a practice was seen as an unattractive option, incompatible with the desire for greater work flexibility and improved work-life balance.¹

At present there is minimal formal opportunity for Australian registrars to acquire skills associated with being an owner-operator, including financial management,^{8,9} cost effective healthcare provision,^{8,10} resource allocation,⁹ strategic planning,⁹ legal and insurance issues,^{8,10–12} and quality assurance.¹⁰ Practice management is identified as a part of The Royal Australian College of General Practitioners (RACGP) curriculum;¹³ however, regional training providers (RTPs) offer few opportunities for acquisition of the necessary skills to be an owner-operator.

Aim

The aim of this project was to explore the interest of general practice registrars in becoming practice owner-operators and the barriers they face with respect to practice ownership. We also investigated the interest of registrars in various education delivery models that could assist in promoting an interest in practice ownership and the skills to confidently perform the owner-operator role.

Methods

We administered an anonymous, web based survey (Survey Monkey) developed through pilot scoping with a convenience sample of registrars and supervisors. All general practice registrars (n=93) in the Australian Capital Territory and southeastern New South Wales training region were invited via email to participate. One reminder was sent 4 weeks after the initial invitation. An additional verbal reminder was made at an educational event attended by some potential respondents. Consent

was attained from participants, and no incentives were offered.

The survey consisted of multiple choice questions and Likert scale scoring of statements that explored previous exposure to and interest in practice ownership, perceived barriers to becoming an owner-operator, and preferred educational delivery models for improving knowledge in this area. The survey design prevented progression without completion of questions. For ease of use respondents were able to save responses and continue at a later date.

Likert scores were analysed using Microsoft Excel and findings are presented in a descriptive analysis. We used SPSS software to compute

correlation co-efficients (Pearson’s *r*) to assess the relationships between registrar characteristics and both interest in owning a practice and desire to acquire practice ownership knowledge.

Results

About 68% (n=63) of registrars in the region commenced the survey and of these, 82% (n=52) completed the entire survey (56% complete response rate). This compares favourably to response rates reported in a meta-analysis of web based surveys in which the mean response rate from 56 online surveys was 34.6% (SD 15.7%).¹⁴

Forty-six percent of respondents were in their first 2 years of registrar training; 65% were

completing the general training pathway. These demographics are reflective of the full cohort of registrars in our training region (Table 1).

Forty-nine percent of respondents had no previous exposure to business ownership (Table 2). Of those with some previous exposure, this was generally knowing a business owner (27%) or having their own previous experience (21%).

The registrars were not complacent about the potential of being an owner-operator: 24% totally disagreed, 31% disagreed that they had given no thought to the prospect (Figure 1), and only 23% indicated that they had no desire to own a practice (Table 3). There were no significant correlations between desire to own a practice and previous exposure ($r=0.16$, $n=56$, $p=0.25$), age ($r=-0.00$, $n=56$, $p=0.99$) or training term ($r=-0.16$, $n=54$, $p=0.25$).

Insufficient knowledge received the highest level of agreement (35% agreed, 36% totally agreed) as being a barrier to ownership. Issues of workload (including time) and bureaucracy were considered to be barriers by the majority of respondents. Just fewer than half of the registrars (33% agreed, 16% totally agreed) viewed financial issues as a barrier (Figure 1).

The majority (65%, Table 3) of registrars were interested in learning more about practice ownership. There were no significant differences between desire to learn more and age ($r=-0.01$, $n=52$, $p=0.99$), training term ($r=0.05$, $n=50$, $p=0.74$) or whether they believed their knowledge was already sufficient ($r=0.15$, $n=52$, $p=0.92$).

When asked about preferred education delivery options, registrars responded favourably

Table 1. Respondent demographics					
	Respondents (n=63)			Training region comparison	
		n	%	n	%
Age range (years)	<31	16	25	NA	NA
	31–40	32	51	NA	NA
	41–50	12	19	NA	NA
	50+	3	5	NA	NA
Training pathway	General	41	65	60	65
	Rural	22	35	33	35
Year of registrar training	First two training years (hospital, GPT1, GPT2)	29	46	38	41
	Subsequent training years (GPT3, extended skills)	32	51	55	59
	No response	2	3	NA	NA

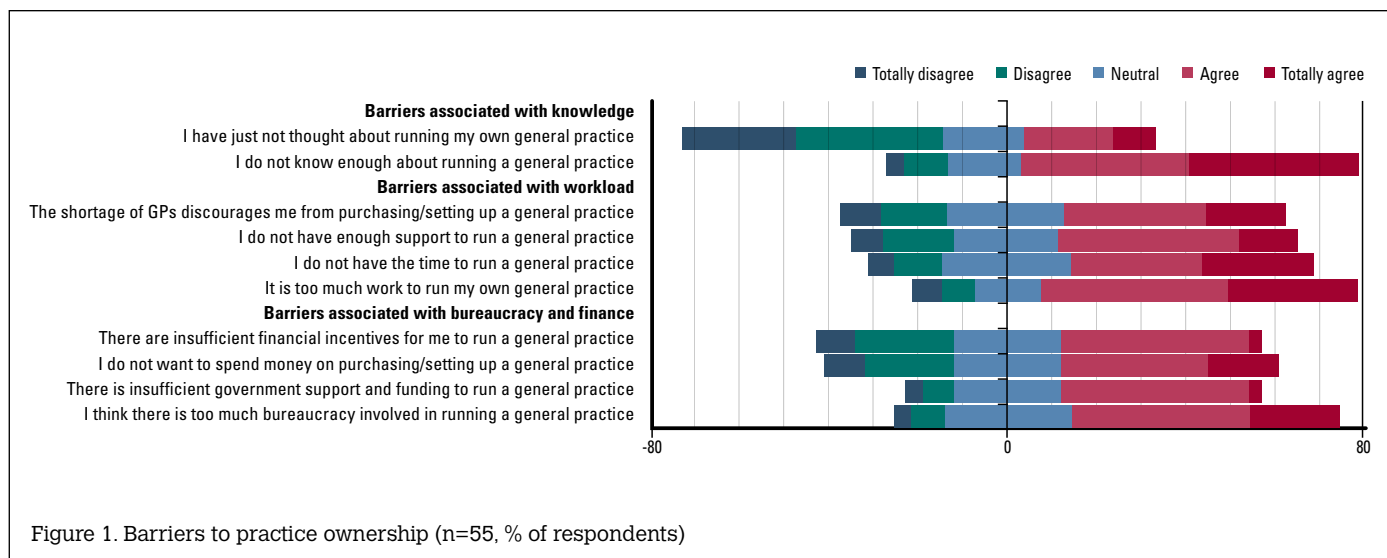


Figure 1. Barriers to practice ownership (n=55, % of respondents)

to mentorship by their current GP supervisor (33% agreed, 35% totally agreed) or another practice owner (29% agreed, 34% totally agreed); educational releases (31% agreed, 35% totally agreed); formal qualifications (31% agreed, 29% totally agreed) or optional study modules (40% agreed, 10% totally agreed) (Figure 2). A

reasonable proportion (42%) would also consider undertaking a special skills term in practice ownership (Table 3). Participants were less favourable toward online or self directed learning.

Discussion

This survey provides unique data exploring

general practice registrars’ interest in, and exposure to, practice ownership and preferences for developing knowledge in this area. Previous anecdotal evidence and survey¹ findings have highlighted a perceived lack of interest in practice ownership among recently fellowed and current registrars. This has implications for the future of privately owned general practices, and potentially for general practice training through reduction in available training places. In contrast, our study revealed that a reasonable number of registrars would consider owning a practice, with only 23% indicating a firm disinterest in this career opportunity.

Previous research has suggested that finance, time commitment and lifestyle factors were barriers for registrars buying or establishing a practice,¹ and the response in our research supported this sentiment. However, our research shows that insufficient knowledge of practice ownership and negative perceptions of associated workload and bureaucracy are additional barriers.

The registrars we surveyed had an interest in expanding their knowledge. Currently RTPs, third party providers, and the RACGP deliver practice ownership education in the form of self directed learning or online modules. Our survey indicated that these delivery styles are least preferred by registrars.

Registrars indicated positive interest in attending workshops focused on practice ownership. By including the option of practice ownership workshops in release programs, RTPs

Table 2. Previous exposure to business ownership and management

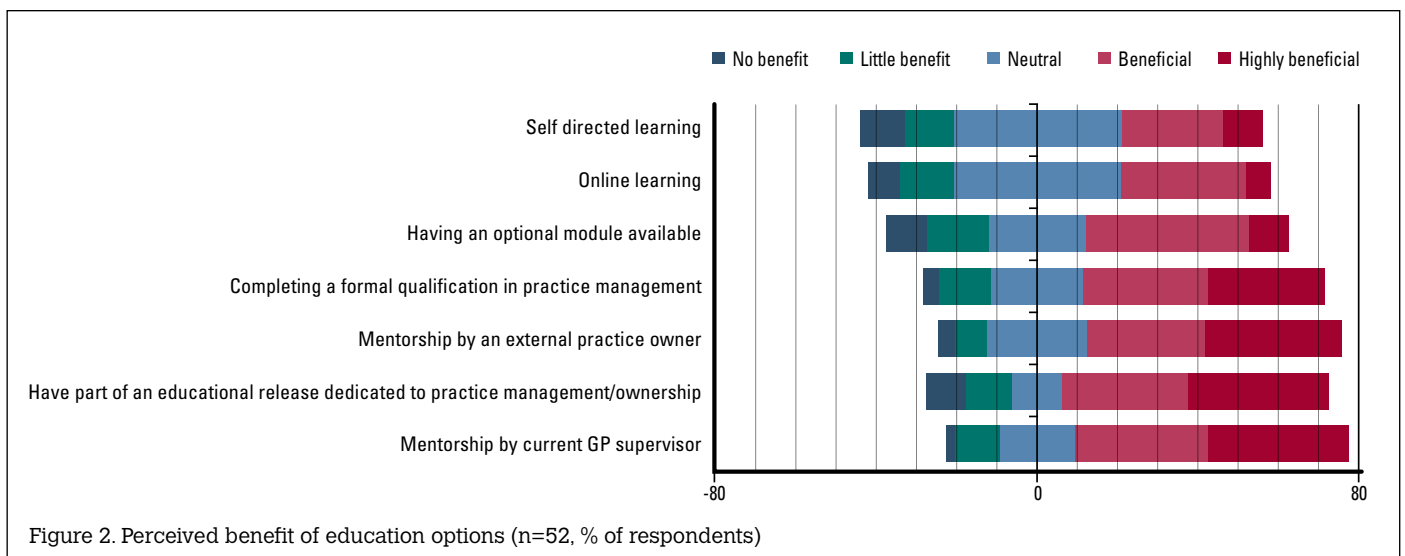
Statement (n=63 respondents)	n	%*
I have had no previous exposure	31	49
Respondents with some previous exposure	32	51
• Someone I know has/had their own business	17	27
• I have had previous experience with my own business	13	21
• I have completed a tertiary business course	2	3
• I have made enquiries with potential practices/business partners	2	3
• I have read literature related to owning a business	1	1.5

* Respondents could select more than one option

Table 3. Interest in practice ownership

Statement (n=number of respondents)	Yes (%)	Undecided (%)	No (%)
Would you like to own your own practice in the future? (n=56)	32*	43	23
Do you think you currently have sufficient knowledge to own your own practice? (n=52)	11	27	62
Would you like to learn more about being an owner-operator during your training? (n=52)	65	23	12
Would you consider doing a special skills term in practice ownership? (n=52)	42	33	25

* This includes 4% who responded that they would consider being an owner-operator in the future only to prevent closure of the practice in which they work



could increase exposure of the next generation of GPs to being an owner-operator. The interest in such an option warrants further research into appropriate content and structure of a workshop designed to both increase interest in practice ownership, and to improve related skills.

Our respondents identified mentorship as a favourite learning model. The GP supervisor has already been recognised as having a key role in providing mentorship and role modelling,¹⁵ and it appears that this is suited to the preferences of registrars with respect to practice ownership.

One unique educational delivery model we proposed was an extended skills post in practice ownership. This model received favourable interest from almost half of the registrars. Such a post could incorporate a formalised process of in-depth mentoring in which registrars have the opportunity to learn practice ownership skills 'on the job', with supervision from an experienced practice owner (similar to the academic skills post funded by General Practice and Training). The RTPs are uniquely placed to provide organisation and support for such a program. Further investigation into practical models (eg. funding and curriculum) for such a term, and the interest of GP supervisors in engaging in mentorship in this field, is warranted.

This research was conducted in only one Australian training region, however, a wide range of registrars were represented with respect to age, training pathway and level of training. The decline in private general practice ownership observed throughout the country is of concern to general practice, and development of strategies to increase interest and skills in this field is pertinent to succession planning. We hope our findings provoke consideration of this concern in other training regions.

Key points

- A reasonable number of general practice registrars are interested in practice ownership.
- Insufficient knowledge of what is needed to own a practice is a previously unmentioned barrier for registrars considering practice ownership. Supervisors could consider discussing practice ownership with registrars.

- Practice owners/supervisors could consider mentoring a registrar interested in practice ownership as a form of succession planning.

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