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Comparing patients' perceptions of IMGs and local Australian graduates in rural general practice

Background

Despite criticism of the clinical performance of international medical graduates (IMGs), little is known about the views of patients within a general practice setting.

Methods

A survey was conducted to measure the responses of 1127 patients of 10 GPs, five IMGs and five Australian graduates. The General Practice Assessment Questionnaire was used to assess the attitudes of patients towards attributes of the consultation and how the patient felt in terms of understanding and coping with their problem or illness.

Discussion

No statistically significant differences were found in any of the reported categories, although there were some responses that approached significance and warrant further investigation. The level of patient satisfaction with, and acceptance of, received care was similar whether the GP was an IMG or not.

Keywords: general practice, manpower; research; doctor patient relations



International medical graduates (IMGs) form a significant part of the Australian workforce.

Since the mid-1990s shortages in the Australian medical workforce have led to rapid increases in the numbers of overseas trained doctors.¹ While historically these doctors have come from the United Kingdom and Ireland, now they come from more diverse backgrounds.¹ Although there has been recognition that, particularly in rural Australia, such doctors form a valued part of our medical workforce, their integration has also been described as a strain on the health care system with communication difficulties, significant variability in medical knowledge and clinical skills being cited as issues.^{2,3} Indeed IMGs themselves have articulated a need to improve their language and communication skills,⁴ in particular with the use of idiom, nuances and vernacular terms, and with being able to read nonverbal cues.⁵ While the clinical performance of some doctors within the public health care system has led to well publicised criticism of IMGs,⁶ there is comparatively little known about the views of patients within a general practice setting.

This study explored the perceptions of a rural general practice population toward the quality of consultations with their general practitioner. The aim was to compare the quality of the interaction experiences of patients seeing international medical graduate (IMG) GPs to those of patients seeing Australian graduate GPs.

Methods

A convenience sample consisting of full time doctors who worked at the three largest general practices in a rural provincial city was involved in the study. All practices were accredited.

Patients of 10 GPs, five IMGs (including one general practice registrar in their final year) and five Australian graduates, were surveyed using the General Practice Assessment Questionnaire (Consultation Version 1.0).⁷ Responses to questions 10 and 11, the two questions that deal with patient attitude toward individual GPs rather than the practice organisation, are reported in this paper. Question 10 asks the patient to think about their consultation on the day they completed the questionnaire and to rate eight attributes of the consultation (*Table 1*). Question 11 asks how the patient felt in terms of understanding and coping with their problem or illness (*Table 2*).

All patients over 17 years of age presenting to the identified GPs over a 1 week period were provided written information on the study and invited to participate in this research. The receptionist provided participating patients with the study questionnaire before the GP consultation, patients were then given the opportunity to return the questionnaire to the receptionist or via post, in a prepaid envelope, to the Riverina Division of General Practice and Primary Health.

Ethics approval for the study was gained from the University of New South Wales Human Research Ethics Committee.

Results

The receptionists were given 1500 questionnaires for distribution, 150 for each of the doctors involved in the study. A total of 1127 individuals responded to questions 10 and 11 (a response rate of 75%). The majority, 92.8%, of the respondents were born in Australia and a further 2.6% were from English speaking countries (England, Scotland and New Zealand). Two percent of respondents indicated they were from Asia.

Table 1. Patient rating of their consultation with the general practitioner

Thinking about your consultation with the doctor today, how do you rate the following?:		Very poor	Poor	Fair	Good	Very good	Excellent	Does not apply	Pearson's chi-square $p < 0.05$
10a) How thoroughly the doctor asked about your symptoms and how you are feeling?	IMG	1 (0.2%)	2 (0.3%)	24 (4.1%)	93 (15.9%)	204 (34.9%)	248 (42.4%)	13 (2.2%)	$p=0.17$
	Australian graduate	1 (0.2%)	0 (0%)	11 (2%)	80 (14.8%)	174 (32%)	260 (48.0%)	16 (3.0%)	
								Total 585	
								Total 542	
10b) How well the doctor listened to what you had to say?	IMG	1 (0.2%)	1 (0.2%)	19 (3.3%)	87 (14.9%)	186 (31.8%)	284 (48.6%)	6 (1.0%)	$p=0.38$
	Australian graduate	1 (0.2%)	0 (0%)	7 (1.3%)	74 (13.7%)	179 (33.1%)	273 (50.4%)	7 (1.3%)	
								Total 584	
								Total 541	
10c) How well the doctor put you at ease during your physical examination?	IMG	1 (0.2%)	0 (0%)	14 (2.4%)	94 (16.1%)	179 (30.8%)	258 (44.3%)	36 (6.2%)	$p=0.33$
	Australian graduate	1 (0.2%)	0 (0%)	9 (1.7%)	65 (12.1%)	167 (31%)	266 (49.4%)	30 (5.6%)	
								Total 582	
								Total 538	
10d) How well the doctor involved you in decisions about your care?	IMG	2 (0.3%)	4 (0.7%)	20 (3.5%)	104 (18%)	173 (30%)	254 (43.9%)	21 (3.6%)	$p=0.15$
	Australian graduate	1 (0.2%)	1 (0.2%)	15 (2.8%)	68 (12.7%)	185 (34.5%)	247 (45.9%)	20 (3.7%)	
								Total 578	
								Total 537	
10e) How well the doctor explained your problems or any treatment that you need?	IMG	3 (0.5%)	2 (0.3%)	20 (3.4%)	89 (15.3%)	175 (30.0%)	275 (47.2%)	19 (3.3%)	$p=0.33$
	Australian graduate	1 (0.2%)	1 (0.2%)	10 (1.9%)	65 (12.0%)	173 (32.0%)	273 (50.6%)	17 (3.1%)	
								Total 583	
								Total 540	
10f) The amount of time your doctor spent with you today?	IMG	2 (0.4%)	2 (0.4%)	22 (3.8%)	115 (20.2%)	169 (29.6%)	252 (44.2%)	8 (1.4%)	$p=0.17$
	Australian graduate	1 (0.2%)	0 (0%)	16 (3.0%)	97 (18.4%)	168 (31.8%)	237 (44.9%)	9 (1.7%)	
								Total 570	
								Total 528	
10g) The doctor's patience with your questions or worries?	IMG	1 (0.2%)	2 (0.3%)	19 (3.3%)	93 (16.1%)	163 (28.1%)	285 (49.2%)	16 (2.8%)	$p=0.48$
	Australian graduate	1 (0.2%)	0 (0%)	12 (2.2%)	72 (13.5%)	159 (29.8%)	279 (52.2%)	11 (2.1%)	
								Total 579	
								Total 534	
10h) The doctor's caring and concern for you?	IMG	5 (0.9%)	3 (0.5%)	16 (2.7%)	88 (15%)	154 (26.4%)	313 (53.6%)	5 (0.9%)	$p=0.08$
	Australian graduate	1 (0.2%)	0 (0%)	6 (1.1%)	67 (12.6%)	150 (28.3%)	299 (56.3%)	8 (1.5%)	
								Total 584	
								Total 531	

Table 2. Patient rating of ability to understand and cope with problem or illness

		Much more than before the visit	A little more than before the visit	The same or less than before the visit	Does not apply		Pearson's chi-square $p < 0.05$
11a) After seeing the doctor today do you feel able to understand your problem(s) or illness?	IMG	241 (42.7%)	160 (28.4%)	61 (10.8%)	102 (18.1%)	Total 564	$p=0.078$
	Australian graduate	235 (46.2%)	111 (21.8%)	67 (13.1%)	96 (18.9%)	Total 509	
11b) After seeing the doctor today do you feel able to cope with your problem(s) or illness?	IMG	232 (41.6%)	149 (26.7%)	80 (14.3%)	97 (17.4%)	Total 558	$p=0.585$
	Australian graduate	221 (43.2%)	119 (23.2%)	82 (16.0%)	90 (17.6%)	Total 512	
11c) After seeing the doctor today do you feel able to keep yourself healthy?	IMG	216 (38.5%)	139 (24.8%)	83 (14.8%)	123 (21.9%)	Total 561	$p=0.438$
	Australian graduate	198 (39%)	118 (23.2%)	92 (18.1%)	100 (19.7%)	Total 508	

The patient evaluations of consultations with IMG GPs and Australian graduate GPs are presented in *Table 1* and *2*. Both tables show that patients in this study had high levels of satisfaction with their GPs, irrespective of whether the GP was an IMG or not. Patient rating of the consultation, as reported in *Table 1*, indicated that fewer than 5% of patients rated the consultation process as less than good. Patient rating of ability to cope with a problem or illness as a result of the consultation was also similar for both groups of graduates and in the majority of cases was reported as having improved (*Table 2*).

Discussion

No statistically significant differences were found in any of the reported categories although there were two responses that approached significance and warrant further research (10h and 11a).

Respondents to the questionnaire appeared to be representative of the regional population studied: the results of the 2006 census show that 6.8% of the population in the regional centre studied indicated they were born overseas and 3.1% indicated they spoke a language other than English at home.⁸

The study was limited in that it asked patients for their reaction to an IMG with whom they had already scheduled an appointment, rather than sampling the general population. It could be presumed that patients who were unhappy with

a GP would not continue to see that individual. On the other hand, choice is often limited in rural areas by doctor availability. While it is recognised that a common factor of patient satisfaction surveys is that patients are often uncritical of their care, they are more likely to be critical of specific components of their care,⁹ which is what this survey attempted to elicit.

Conclusion

This study showed that the majority of predominantly Australian born patients who had a consultation with an IMG GP (or registrar) described a similar quality of experience to Australian born patients who saw Australian graduate GPs. This suggests a high level of patient satisfaction and acceptance of receiving care from IMGs in these three practices and reinforces the perception that overseas trained GPs are valued members of our profession.²

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