

Medical Student's Attitudes Towards a Career in General Practice

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Abstract

Aims

This study seeks to understand student's perceptions of a career in general practice and explore how these perceptions are influenced.

Methods

This is a cross-sectional study of penultimate and final year medical students in University College Cork, conducted via an online questionnaire. This included a mix of qualitative and quantitative questions. The quantitative data was analyzed using chi squared tests and logistic regression. The qualitative data was analyzed using the Framework method.

Results

A total of 70 students responded to the survey. 46 participants (64.8%) were considering a career in primary care. Job satisfaction, working hours and a close relationship to the patient were most important to students. 38 (54%) of students considered the professional status of general practitioners lower to that of hospital specialists. Year 3 GP placement had the most positive influence on students. Qualitative analysis showed that students were discouraged from general practice by the denigration of general practice by hospital doctors and by the lack of resources in the specialty.

Discussion

This study has shown that most students are considering a career in general practice. However, there is a perceived lower status for general practitioners. It is paramount that they are supported to maintain the attractiveness of the career.

Introduction

Patient's experience of difficulty finding general practitioners (GPs) has brought the medical specialty under the scrutiny of the public eye and to the direct attention of the Irish political sphere^{1,2}. The extent of the shortage of GPs was described in a 2015 survey by the Irish College of General Practitioners (ICGP). The survey, distributed to GPs across the country, found that there were no sessional GPs available in 55% of cases and substantial difficulty recruiting locums, particularly in rural areas. Thus, putting patient care and same day service at risk³.

The new Sláintecare program places increased emphasis on community care, while an aging population means patients with more complex needs and large numbers of GPs set to retire^{4,5}. A 2019 report by the ICGP found that 35.1% of current GP trainees are considering emigration. Reasons for consideration of emigrating included concerns regarding quality of life and the viability of GP⁶. These concerns are not unfounded, as 74% of GPs report their stress level to be high or very high³, while a recent study has shown that 80% of practices reported reduced profit over the Covid-19 pandemic⁷.

This research hopes to add to previous studies that have examined the attitudes of medical students to this specialty, such as that done by Barber et. Al in the University of Oxford⁸, and a quantitative study by O' Tuathail et. al⁹ across the medical schools in the Republic of Ireland. This study aims to investigate the demographic features associated with a career in general practice, student's career values, student's perceptions of a career in general practice and how these perceptions are influenced.

Methods

This study was a self-selecting cross-sectional survey. The population chosen was medical students in University College Cork. It included only penultimate and final year students. This population was identified as these students all have clinical experience in a general practice setting, as well as substantial exposure to other aspects of medical school, whose influence was measured in the study.

The questionnaire was developed by Barber et. Al, who generously agreed for its use in this study. The questionnaire was adapted to make it more applicable to the setting. The questionnaire was distributed via student email. It was available for four months; in which time reminders were sent to the class via WhatsApp to increase the response rate.

This questionnaire consisted of a mixture of multiple choice, Likert scale and short free text answers. The dependent variable measured was whether students found a career in general practice attractive or very attractive. The independent variables included student's demographic features, the careers they were considering, the career factors that students valued, which factors they associated with general practice and, how their views were influenced.

The quantitative results of the survey were analysed using Microsoft Excel and SPSS. Numerical values were assigned to the Likert scale answers, and the average of each answer was found. Chi Square tests were performed on all independent variables to identify any of interest. Then, Binary Logistic Regression was used to assess the impact of the variables of interest on the dependent variable, together and individually.

The qualitative results were analysed using the Framework Method using Microsoft Excel. All the data was sorted thematically in continuous consultation of a qualitative expert to review and critique the analysis process. The qualitative expert has over twenty years' experience with qualitative analysis.

An application was submitted to the School of Medicine Sub-Committee of SREC for ethical perusal. Approval was granted on the 12th of October 2021.

Results

Quantitative Analysis

70 people responded to the survey giving a response rate of 17.5%.

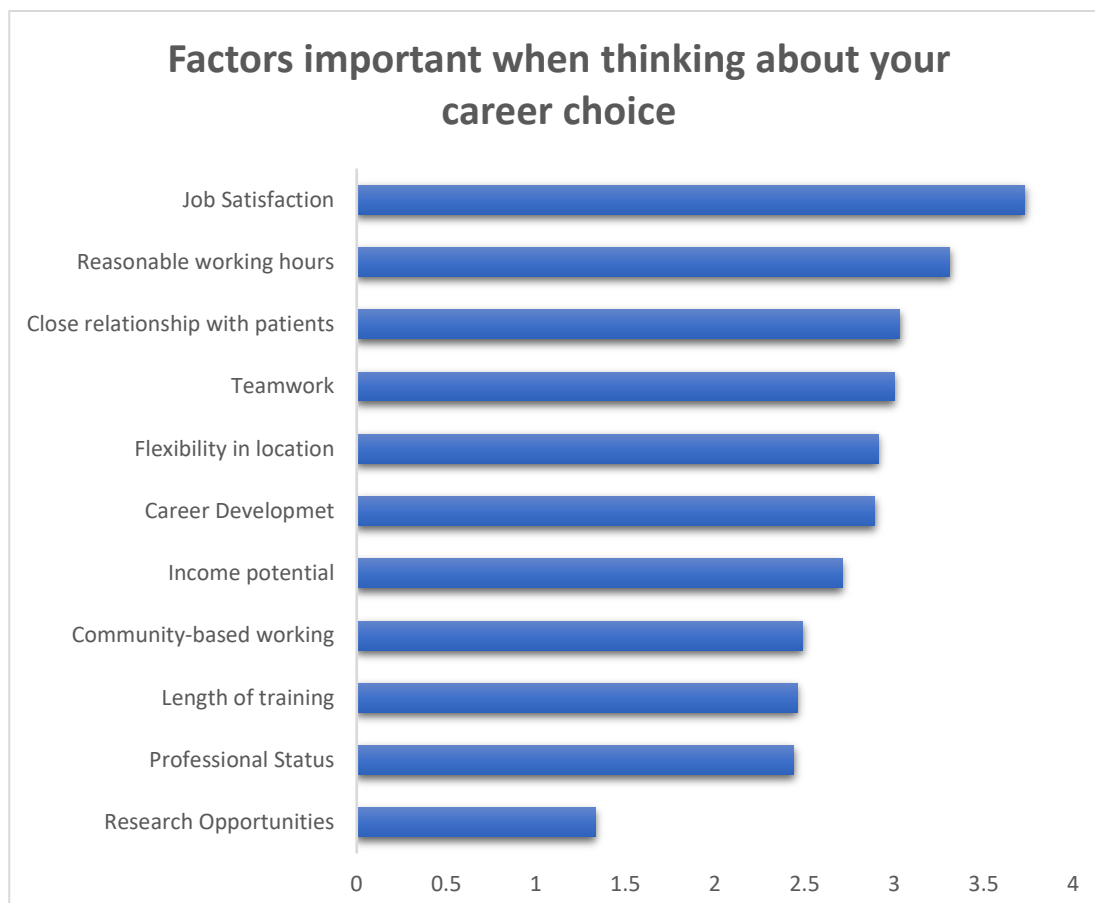
The test population consisted of 28 (41.2%) males and 40 (58.8%) females. 30 (44.1%) participants had come from non-selective state schools in Ireland.

There were no associations between the demographic factors of students and a consideration of a career in general practice.

Students were asked to indicate which careers they were currently considering. 46 (64.8%) participants were considering a career in primary care. 64 (94.1%) were considering working abroad after qualifying. 39 (55.7%) rated general practice as attractive or very attractive. 38 (55.9%) students considered general practice to be a lower status compared to hospital specialists.

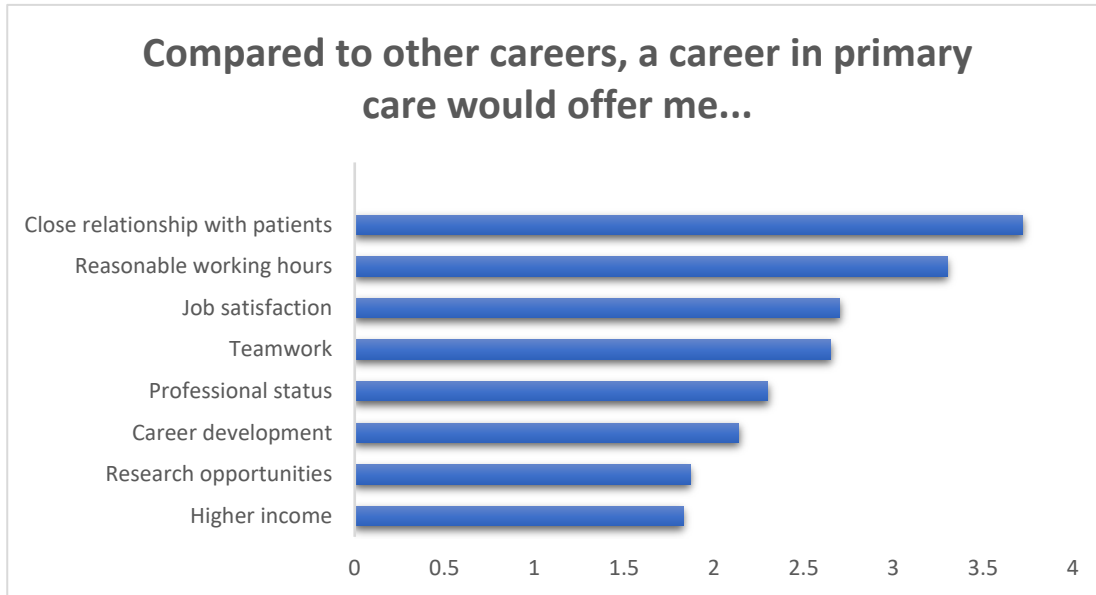
Job satisfaction, reasonable working hours and a close relationship with patients were considered the principal factors when choosing a career.

Figure 1:



Career factors which students thought were more likely to be offered in primary care were a close relationship with the patient, reasonable working hours and job satisfaction.

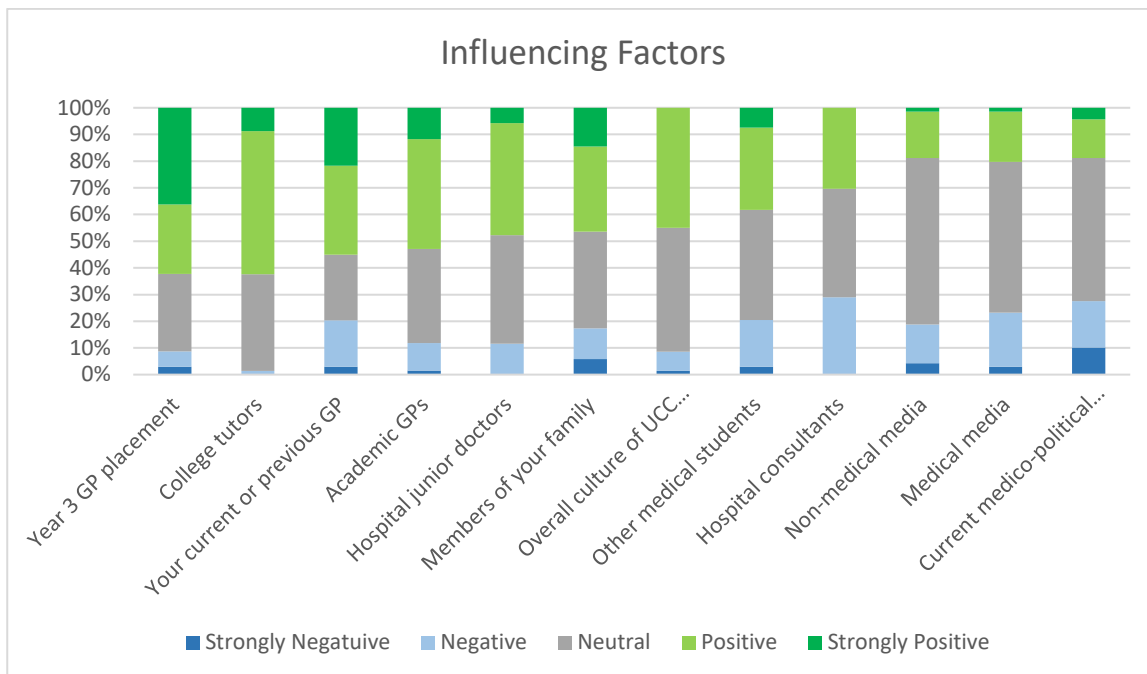
Figure 2:



Students found that Year 3 GP placement, college tutors and their current or previous GP had the most positive influence on their views towards

general practice.

Figure 3:



Chi squared testing revealed five variables associated with consideration of a career in general practice. Following binary logistic regression, the significant variables were narrowed down to reasonable working hours and job satisfaction.

Table 1:

	Adjusted odds ratio	95% confidence interval lower limit	95% confidence interval upper limit	P value
Reasonable working hours	2.571	1.064	6.212	0.036
Job Satisfaction	2.050	1.036	4.058	0.039
Constant	0.003			0.012

Qualitative Analysis

This qualitative analysis can be primarily divided into the factors associated with a career in general practice, the influence of GPs and the denigration of GP.

As with any career, the students considered the pros and cons of life as a GP. Many students spoke of the ability to form a close relationship with their patients. *“It is a privilege to be the practitioner a patient first turns to for help and I don't think that relationship is present in any other specialty” – S36.*

Aspects of future life, such as family planning were on student’s minds. *“My boyfriend’s dad is a GP who was originally training to be a neonatologist before finding it too time consuming to raise a family at the same time.” – S69* However, it was admitted that these flexible hours were not always guaranteed. *“GPs I know have said that primary care involves more working hours than one might expect.”- S11*

Students were perturbed by the added administrative responsibilities of GP. *“Essentially need to act as a business owner as well as a doctor” -S21* The perceived lack of resources for GPs is causing attitudes towards the career path to change. *“It seems they tend to be overrun with patients and can’t give each patient enough time. The perception of it being an easier specialty is changing a lot” -S17*

GPs themselves were considered to have the biggest influence on student’s attitudes towards general practice. This was a positive influence, with the exception of a few. For some, this originated from their learning. *“College tutors and academic GPs, particularly those who taught me in first and second year always painted a career in general practice in a positive way.” -S49* There were role-models on a larger scale as well. *“I have been encouraged by influential doctors in Canada like Dr. Danielle Martin who is a family doctor who is a champion for healthcare improvement. I would really like to have a career like hers some day!” – 29*

The few exceptions, came from students being actively discouraged from the career, *“GPs have discouraged me as there is a lot of work to do among very few people” -29,* or from poor practices in front of students, *“I saw a practice and system that seemed more concerned with making money than effective patient care.” -S47*

Denigration of GPs was few and far between, with most students reporting GPs being spoken of in a positive light. This was found in hospitals. *“Dermatology registrar: said the work was bottom of the barrel.” -S36* This also took place in the home. *“Family members - would say you’re doing medicine so do something more academic and specialised - be an expert in a field. They have said you’ll be dealing with coughs and colds your whole life if you choose GP.” -S9*

Discussion

Many aspects of this study are aligned to that of the study performed by Barber. Et al in Oxford University, England⁸. This includes the questionnaire and much of the data analysis.

Job satisfaction was rated the principal factor when considering your future career, followed by reasonable working hours and a close relationship with patients. However, as was the case in Oxford it was noted that this balance is not guaranteed, and more work might be involved than expected. In both studies, reasonable working hours was the only career factor significantly associated with finding a career in GP attractive. This has been seen in many other studies, with an association found in students who valued a good work environment^{10,11}, a controllable lifestyle^{12,13}, and good working hours¹³. Other students spoke of how a close patient relationship was the driving force behind the attractiveness of GP. While there was no statistically significant association with a close patient relationship it was repeatedly mentioned in the free text answers, and this association has been found in numerous other studies^{8,11,13,14,15}. It is important that the time needed to form a close relationship with patients is protected.

Primary care centers were considered as a positive factor for a career as a GP. This can be seen with many current GPs, in which over 2/3 supporting the principle of primary care teams, but only 1/3 feeling that they are currently in a well-functioning one. Less than ¼ would have a preference for a co-location with a primary care team³. This is an area which has room for significant improvement, and one in which impacts on how students view the specialty.

A side to general practice that was not mentioned in the Oxford study was that of administration. The free text questions allowed students to express how the business management side of the specialty was off putting, increasing working hours and strain on GPs.

Nearly all the responses mentioning GPs spoke of their positive influence on student perceptions of the specialty. This was not only student’s first-hand experience, but there was also a role for larger scale influencers, seen through social media.

There was some denigration of GPs noted by students. However, this was not prominent, and all the influences assessed had an overall positive influence rather than negative. While other studies have shown the academic environment to have a negative influence on student’s perceptions this was not the case in UCC^{8,16}.

There were no students, in either this study or that in Oxford who considered GPs to be higher status than hospital specialists. Even though it has been recognized by medical students that primary care

is an essential part of the healthcare system, it is not seen as having the same prestige as other specialty positions¹⁷.

This study had a response rate of just 17.5%. This means that response bias must be taken into account when interpreting the results of the study. As only two years of medical students were invited to participate in the study, it is not representative of the medical student population. There was no analysis performed to assess for differences between the two years.

However, using a mix of both quantitative and qualitative questions allowed us collect numerical data while giving students the freedom to express their full views. The rigorous analysis of the quantitative data using binary logistic regression produced more significant results.

Follow up research is needed on how student's attitudes change when they enter the working world, and what proportion of graduates are entering the field.

The need to attract younger generations of doctors to the specialty becomes ever more apparent. The principal career factors considered by respondents of this study suggests that the work/life balance and the close relationships formed with patients are considered the most influential. However, the goal of attracting younger generations of doctors into the specialty considering these influencing factors is challenged by the levels of support GPs receive, both by colleagues and resources.

Declarations of Conflicts of Interest:

None declared.

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