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Article:

Fowler, I. and Jackson, B.E. (2015) A general practice taster programme for foundation doctors. *BMJ Careers*.

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A general practice taster programme for foundation doctors

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Iolanthe Fowler and Ben Jackson describe the outcomes of a taster programme set up to try to improve recruitment rates to training posts in general practice.

General practice (GP) is struggling to recruit enough applicants to fill vacancies on specialty training programmes at a time when there is already a shortage of GPs and when service reconfiguration is increasing demand on primary care services and requiring GPs to be more involved in commissioning (1,2). Medical educators therefore need to consider any measure that could encourage young doctors to choose general practice as a career.

Currently, only around 20% of current medical graduates express a clear preference for general practice one year after qualification (3). However, around 50% of graduates include general practice as one of their top three career choices, and short periods of exposure to primary care have been shown to increase the likelihood of medical students choosing a career in general practice (3,4). We therefore wanted to look for any potential impact on future career choice of offering foundation trainees additional experience of working in general practice

Between 2012 to 2014, 175 of the 372 (47%) foundation trainees completing the destination survey in South Yorkshire had general practice as part of their rotation, (with 112 (30%) completing this placement before applications for specialty training were required). The offer of additional experience in general practice before application was thought to be important to those without general practice, in order they can consider their choices fully.

To address this, in 2012 a programme of taster weeks in general practice was started for foundation trainees in South Yorkshire who did not have general practice as part of their rotation prior to applications for specialty. Such taster weeks are intended to allow trainees to experience a specialty not included in their rotation to help them reflect on their career choice (5) and are commonly available in hospital specialties but before this programme were not available in Yorkshire and the Humber for general practice.

Trainees were offered up to five days in practices. The tasters were offered at the end of the first year or the start of the second year of the foundation programme in order

to coincide as closely as possible with the application deadlines. Only practices approved for postgraduate training were invited to take part and in accordance with national guidance (5), a specified menu of desired activity was developed.

Twenty eight taster placements were undertaken in 2012 and 2013 with an average duration of only three days as trainees reported difficulty with rotas and obtaining leave. We would hope that any such barriers might be overcome in future.

An online questionnaire was used to evaluate the placements and their impact, with 20 trainees completing the survey (71% response rate). Qualitative data was also obtained through free text comments and an follow up e-mail shot to hosting GP trainers. Finally, the foundation school destination survey was examined to assess future career choice of the relevant trainees.

All 20 trainees said that their placement had allowed exploration of what a career in general practice entails, in terms of skills, behaviours, and aptitudes. In addition, 14 reported they had spent time discussing GP training with a current trainee (including issues around work-life balance, career choice, and entry into training), and 13 said discussing work-life balance and other issues relating to a career in general practice with a senior GP. When asked about effect on career choice, 18 out of the 20 indicated they were more likely to choose general practice as a career after the placement [Author query: can you explain what this means? Is “more or less likely” correct?].

The qualitative responses showed that most trainees found that the taster weeks were positive experiences. They commented on the flexibility, friendliness, and approachability of the doctors and the wider teams in general practice.

The trainees reported being exposed to the bulk of the variety of work in general practice, including visits, palliative care meetings, debriefing sessions, and minor surgery, as well as standard surgeries and clinics. They saw consultations undertaken by different GPs and so were able to witness different consulting styles.

The trainees also said that the opportunities to speak openly to GPs about what a career in general practice was like, had helped them gain insight into the everyday professional life of GPs. They were able to talk to trainees in different stages of their training about working like, training in general practice, and how to apply to training in general practice.

When asked about what could be done to improve the tasters, a number of suggestions were made. Those who had placements of two or three days, because of problems with rotas, said that they would have liked longer, although they still reported that the shorter placement was valuable and worthwhile. Other themes that arose were more time with trainees to watch them at work and to discuss their roles, training, and work-life balance. Some said they would have liked to be able to see patients independently and for the placement to have had a more structured or timetabled approach.

Six of the nine trainers from the 2012 cohort responded to an online questionnaire regarding the usefulness and practicality of the taster programme. The trainers said that they thought the programme was valuable and that the main challenges of the taster sessions were logistical, with short notice, space, and time being the main issues raised.

The destination survey shows fifteen (54%) of the trainees who undertook taster weeks are now in general practice training programmes. Six are currently not working in the UK, three are training in psychiatry (although one of these applied to general practice as a first choice), two are in service posts, one has started for core medical training, and one is training in paediatrics

The pilot programme served its primary function as all trainees felt that they were able to explore what a future career in general practice would entail, and the programme has now been rolled out across the other foundation schools across Yorkshire and the Humber. We recommend that the promotion or expansion of such additional opportunities in general practice should form part of the overall strategy of local education and training boards in addressing workforce demand.

References

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