Predictors of attitude to an occupational medicine career in a cohort of final year medical students in the UK

Dr Gifty Jonas, 2015

ABSTRACT

Background: Since 2004, the Faculty of Occupational Medicine (FOM) has been involved in promoting occupational medicine in UK medical schools. Over the past 30 years, it has long been recognised that there has been a distinct lack of commitment on the part of UK medical schools to the teaching of occupational medicine. In conjunction with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), the FOM has endeavoured to promote awareness of work and health within medical schools in order to better equip medical students for their future careers, irrespective of their specialty choice, and also to encourage medical students to consider occupational medicine as a career. Despite the above, the numbers of doctors trained in occupational medicine remains small.

Objectives: To evaluate the attitudes and awareness of final year medical students in the UK to occupational medicine and to determine predictors of attitude to a career in occupational medicine.

Materials and methods: A cross sectional survey was conducted by distributing a paper based questionnaire amongst the study population (n = 348). The data was analysed using SPSS version 20. Statistical analysis included binary logistic regression analysis.

Results: The response rate was 36% (n=126). The results indicate that amongst this study population, reports of exposure to occupational medicine teaching varied from little to none. Only 18% of the responders recalled having received teaching in occupational medicine. 72% of the responders reported that from the overall teaching they had received during their undergraduate curriculum, they were unable to recognise work related conditions. In spite of this, the majority of responders (82%) reported that knowledge of occupational medicine may be relevant to their future practice.

Predictors of attitude to a career in occupational medicine were not determined as the results from this study were not statistically significant due to the small sample size.
However, a trend was observed with older responders more likely to consider occupational medicine as a current career option whilst those responders who reported having a parent as a doctor were less likely to do so. Of note, 77% of the study population had already decided on a career choice preference.

Encouragingly, 7% (9/126) of the study population reported a current interest in a career in occupational medicine and 59% of the responders who were not currently considering a career in occupational medicine had not completely discounted it as a future career choice. The reasons given for not currently considering occupational medicine as a career option were that they did not have enough knowledge of occupational medicine as a specialty.

**Conclusions:** The results suggest that amongst this study population there has been insufficient exposure to occupational medicine teaching. Career choice preferences develop prior to qualifying. Therefore, improving the knowledge base of medical students to occupational medicine prior to their final undergraduate year will not only enable them to understand the links between health and work, whichever branch of medicine they pursue, but hopefully also encourage them to pursue a career in occupational medicine.