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Effect of sex on specialty training application outcomes: a longitudinal administrative data study of UK medical graduates

Katherine Woolf,1 Hirosha Jayaweera,1,2 Emily Unwin,1 Karim Keshwani,1,3 Christopher Valerio,1,3 Henry Potts4

ABSTRACT

Objectives To examine sex differences in the specialty training recruitment outcomes of UK medical graduates; and whether sex differences were explained by prior academic attainment and previous fitness to practise (FtP) declarations.

Design Retrospective longitudinal cohort study.

Setting Administrative data on entrants to all UK medical schools from the UK Medical Education Database.

Participants 10 559 doctors (6 155; 58% female) who entered a UK medical school in 2007 or 2008 and were eligible to apply for specialty training by 2015.

Primary outcome measure Odds of application, offer and acceptance to any specialty training programme, and on to each of the nine largest training programmes, adjusting for sex, other demographics, prior academic attainment, FtP declaration and medical school.

Results Across all specialties, there were no sex differences in applications for specialty training, but women had increased odds of getting an offer (OR=1.40; 95% CI=1.25 to 1.57; p<0.001) and accepting one (OR=1.43; 95% CI=1.19 to 1.71; p<0.001). Seven of the nine largest specialties showed significant sex differences in applications, which remained after adjusting for other factors. In the adjusted models, Paediatrics (OR=1.57; 95% CI=1.01 to 2.46; p=0.046) and general practice (GP) (OR=1.23; 95% CI=1.03 to 1.46; p=0.017) were the only specialties to show sex differences in offers, both favouring women. GP alone showed sex differences in acceptances, with women being more likely to accept (OR=1.34; 95% CI=1.03 to 1.76; p=0.03). Doctors with an FtP declaration were slightly less likely to apply to specialty training overall (OR=0.84; 95% CI=0.71 to 1.00; p=0.048) and less likely to accept an offer to any programme (OR=0.71; 95% CI=0.52 to 0.98; p=0.036), after adjusting for confounders.

Conclusions Sex segregation between medical specialties is due to differential application, although research is needed to understand why men are less likely to be offered a place on to GP and Paediatrics training, and if offered GP are less likely to accept.

BACKGROUND

The proportion of men and women in different medical specialties varies greatly, with relatively more women in general practice (GP), paediatrics and obstetrics and gynaecology (O&G), and more men in surgery and radiology. This so-called sex segregation is the result of preferences and constraints, themselves influenced by experiences and gendered societal norms and expectations.

Less is known about whether selection processes influence sex ratios in different specialties, either directly (if the methods used to select applicants show sex differences) or indirectly (if selection methods rely on other measures such as previous academic attainment that themselves show sex differences). For example, it is known that women generally do better on Situational Judgement Tests (SJTs) which are used in some specialty selection programmes in the UK, and they also have slightly higher medical school performance as judged by the Educational Performance Measure (EPM) used to select newly qualified doctors to UK Foundation Training.10 Understanding whether selection processes contribute to differences in the proportions of men and women in different specialties is important for effective

Strengths and limitations of the study

► First study to assess sex differences in the likelihood of receiving and accepting an offer to UK specialty training overall and within nine specialties.

► Sex differences controlled for confounders including prior attainment.

► Large sample size and longitudinal data obtained from the UK Medical Education Database.

► Did not consider the impact of multiple applications or acceptances from multiple offers, and did not formally compare specialties.

► Large number of tests increased the likelihood of type I error.

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1Research Department of Medical Education, University College London Medical School, London, UK
2Centre for Clinical Research in Neuropsychiatry, University of Western Australia, Crawley, Western Australia, Australia
3North Middlesex University Hospital NHS Trust, London, UK
4Centre for Health Informatics and Multiprofessional Education, UCL, London, UK

Correspondence to
Dr Katherine Woolf; k.woolf@ucl.ac.uk
workforce planning and the provision of future health-
care, and could influence efforts to reduce sex segrega-
tion in some specialties.

Relatively little published research addresses the poten-
tial influence of selection processes on outcomes. Studies
and data tend to show either no sex differences, or
women doing slightly better than men. In the UK, a 2013
evaluation of selection in five English regions into five
specialties (core medical training, core surgical training,
psychiatry, O&G and paediatrics), found women in the
sample achieved higher scores in selection into core
surgical training and psychiatry after adjusting for other
demographic factors, with no significant sex differences
in the other specialties.11 A 2016 evaluation of GP selec-
tion found women were more likely to be successful.12 A
2017 study of selection into general and vascular surgery
found no effect of sex on selection scores.13 Publicly avail-
able Canadian Resident Matching Service data from 2017
showed female Canadian medical graduates were slightly
more likely to be successfully matched to a surgical
specialty, with no differences in other specialties.14 Similar
data for the USA are not publicly available, but an histor-
ical analysis of data from 1987 found women were more
likely to get their first choice of specialty and less likely
not to be matched.15 More recent studies of radiology and
anaesthesia residency selection found female applicants
outperformed men.16 17

Research in this area may also help us understand other
areas of stark sex differences in medicine, such as disci-
plinary action, where male doctors have nearly 2.5 times
the odds of facing medicolegal action.18 Recent research
has shown male UK medical graduates have increased
odds of a fitness to practise (FtP) issue at medical
school;19 and professionalism problems at medical school
are known to predict later sanctions.20–22 It is also known
that doctors from certain specialties are at higher risk
of receiving sanctions.23 It is unknown however whether
graduates with an FtP declaration may favour certain
specialties.

The aims of this study are:
1. To measure sex differences in specialty applications,
offers and acceptances.
2. To examine whether sex differences are present in spe-
cialty applications, offers and acceptances after con-
trolling for previous academic attainment, and other
potential confounders.
3. To examine whether medical school FtP declarations
predict specialty choice, taking into account sex and
prior academic attainment.

METHODS
Design and setting
Longitudinal study using data from the UK Medical
Education Database (UKMED). UKMED contains admin-
istrative data on UK medical students. The data and
permission to use the data for research purposes was
obtained from the General Medical Council (GMC). The

study protocol can be found in the online supplementary
material.

Participants
At the time this study was undertaken, UKMED contained
data on 13 763 people—5913 (43%) men and 7850 (57%)
women—who entered medical school in 2007 and 2008.
Our study population comprised 10 559 doctors who
entered a UK medical school in 2007 or 2008 and who had
completed Foundation training and thus were eligible to
apply for Specialty Training by 2015. Compared with the
full dataset, there were slightly fewer men (n=4404; 42%)
in this sample.

Study variables
A summary of all variables included in the analysis is given
in table 1. Further details can be found in the UKMED
data dictionary.24

The primary exposure of interest was a doctor’s sex
(male or female). The secondary exposure of interest was
having a FtP declaration at application to the Foundation
Programme versus having none. The primary outcomes
of interest were:
▶ Specialty training programme(s) applied to.
▶ Specialty training programme offered (of those
applied to).
▶ Specialty training programme accepted (of those
offered).
▶ Application to a specialty training programme versus
no application.

We only included first applications. We did not analyse
the number of applications made, and analysed data for
each specialty separately for example, if a doctor applied
to two specialties, we included them in both specialties.
Men and women did not differ significantly in the
number of multiple applications they made (p=0.77). We
combined applications from all years for the analysis for
everyone who entered medical school in 2007 or 2008.

Prior attainment included both medical school and
pre-medical school academic attainment. Pre-medical
school attainment consisted of Higher Education Statistics
Agency (HESA) tariff points, which is a measure of qual-
ifications on entry to medical school (typically A-levels),
and first attempt aptitude test score, either UK Clinical
Aptitude Test (UKCAT) or Graduate Medical School
Admissions Test (GAMSAT). We also looked at whether
or not a doctor had a university degree before entering
medical school. Medical school attainment consisted of
Foundation Programme Application System (FPAS)
scores, available from 2012 to 2015. This included the
EPM which is a quartile (2012) or decile (2013 onwards)
ranking of an applicant compared with others within their
medical school, SJT score (2013 onwards), degree points
(awarded for university degrees other than the primary
medical degree) and publication points (awarded for
peer reviewed research publications). We recoded degree
points into a three level variable (0=no additional degrees;
1=additional undergraduate degree third class, lower

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second class or upper second class; \(2=\) additional undergraduate degree first class, Master’s degree or doctorate). We also recoded publication points into a binary variable \((0=\text{none}, 1=\text{one or more})\).

We controlled for the medical school doctors graduated from since it is known that graduates of different medical schools differ significantly in terms of the specialties they apply to and their academic performance (eg, refs 25–27). We also controlled for ethnicity, socioeconomic status and premedical school country of domicile, since these are known to influence academic performance.26 29 Ethnicity was a binary variable (black and minority ethnic or BME vs white) created by collapsing all ‘non-white’ groups, including mixed, into the BME category and all white groups into the white category. We included four socioeconomic measures, each of which we collapsed into binary variables: socioeconomic class (SEC; based on parental occupation: higher managerial vs all others), school type (fee-paying vs non-fee-paying), participation of local areas (POLAR) 3 (low participation neighbourhood vs all other neighbourhoods) and free school meals (no free school meals vs free school meals). We chose those variables because they measure slightly different things: POLAR3 is the only area level

| Variable group | Factor | Level | Details | Missing |
|----------------|--------|-------|---------|---------|
| Demographics   | Free school meals | Binary | Free school meals vs no free school meals | N=1722, 16.3% |
|                | Parental socioeconomic class | Binary | Categories 1 to 4 vs category 5 | N=914, 8.7% |
|                | School type | Binary | Non fee-paying vs fee paying | N=920, 8.7% |
|                | Participation of local areas (POLAR) 3 | Binary | Low participation neighbourhood vs all other neighbourhoods | N=1 020, 9.7% |
|                | Ethnicity | Binary | Black and minority ethnic vs white | N=55, 0.5% |
|                | Gender | Binary | Male vs female | N=0 |
|                | Year of birth | Continuous | Min=1959, max=1991 Median=1988 | N=0 |
|                | Pre-medical school domicile | Binary | UK vs non-UK domicile | N=0 |
| Premedical school academic attainment | HESA tariff points | Continuous | Tariff points min=20, max=1036 Mean=473, SD=109 | N=2743, 26% |
|                | University degree prior to medical school | Binary | Prior degree vs no prior degree | N=0 |
|                | First attempt score UK Clinical Aptitude Test (UKCAT) | Continuous | UKCAT points min=1600, max=3340 Mean=2504, SD=222 | N=1524, 14.4% |
| Medical school | Medical school | Categorical | Last recorded medical school name, n= 30 | N=0 |
|                | FPAS educational progress measure | Continuous | Min=34, max=43 Mean=38.7, SD=2.8 | N=1035, 9.8% |
|                | FPAS Situational Judgement Test score | Continuous | Min=4.50, max=50 Mean=40.8, SD=3.2 | N=4588, 43.5% |
|                | FPAS degree points | Continuous | Min=0, max=2 Mean=0.94, SD=0.73 | N=3541, 33.6% |
|                | FPAS publication points | Binary | None vs one or more | N=1035, 9.8% |
|                | Fitness to practise declaration | Binary | Declaration vs no declaration | N=0 |
| Specialty application | Applied to at least one of 22 specialties | Binary | Applied vs not applied | N=0 |
|                | Applied to each specialty | Binary | Applied vs not applied nine largest specialties | N=0 |
|                | Offered at least one of 22 specialties | Binary | Offered vs not offered | N=0 Excludes non-applicants |
|                | Offered each specialty | Binary | Offered vs not offered nine largest specialties | N=0 Excludes non-applicants |
|                | Accepted at least one of 22 specialties | Binary | Accepted vs not accepted | N=0 Excludes not offered |
|                | Accepted each specialty | Binary | Accepted vs not accepted nine largest specialties | N=0 Excludes not offered |

FPAS, Foundation Programme Application System; HESA, Higher Education Statistics Agency.
Table 2  Sex differences in applications, offers and acceptances across all specialties and in the nine largest specialties (32% of doctors applied to multiple specialties)

| Specialty               | % applied (women, men) | Unadjusted odds woman applied (95% CI) | Adjusted odds woman applied (95% CI) | % offered (women, men) | Unadjusted odds woman offered (95% CI) | Adjusted odds woman offered (95% CI) | % accepted (women, men) | Unadjusted odds woman accepted (95% CI) | Adjusted odds woman accepted (95% CI) |
|-------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| All specialties         | 72.3 (72.0, 72.7)      | 0.97 (0.40 to 2.30)                    | 0.94 (0.85 to 1.03)                 | 81.3 (83.5, 78.3)      | 1.40 (1.25 to 1.58)**                  | 1.31 (1.16 to 1.48)**                  | 90.8 (92.1, 78.3)         | 1.54 (1.30 to 1.84)**                  | 1.47 (1.23 to 1.77)**                  |
| ACCS EM                 | 5.8 (5.0, 6.9)         | 0.71 (0.68 to 0.74)**                  | 0.69 (0.57 to 0.85)**               | 72.2 (74.8, 69.7)      | 1.29 (0.85 to 1.96)                    | 1.50 (0.94 to 2.39)                    | 67.4 (73.5, 60.8)         | 1.79 (1.11 to 2.87)*                  | 1.57 (0.92 to 2.70)                  |
| Clinical radiology      | 3.8 (3.0, 5.0)         | 0.58 (0.46 to 0.73)**                  | 0.65 (0.49 to 0.85)**               | 49.5 (66.4, 61.9)      | 0.81 (0.51 to 1.28)                    | 0.71 (0.41 to 1.21)                    | 63.2 (67.2, 60.2)         | 1.35 (0.68 to 2.70)                   | 1.77 (0.77 to 4.09)                  |
| Core anaesthetics       | 12.0 (10.1, 14.7)      | 0.65 (0.57 to 0.79)**                  | 0.57 (0.49 to 0.85)**               | 66.5 (69.2, 64.0)      | 1.27 (0.81 to 1.76)                    | 1.06 (0.81 to 1.50)                    | 76.1 (75.2, 77.0)         | 0.90 (0.62 to 1.31)                   | 0.90 (0.60 to 1.35)                  |
| Core medical            | 29.9 (29.9 to 29.8)    | 1.00 (0.91 to 1.11)                    | 1.01 (0.91 to 1.12)                 | 72.9 (73.5, 72.1)      | 1.07 (0.89 to 1.29)                    | 1.08 (0.89 to 1.32)                    | 75.5 (75.2, 76.0)         | 0.95 (0.76 to 1.29)                   | 1.01 (0.80 to 1.28)                  |
| Core psychiatry         | 5.3 (4.8, 5.8)         | 0.85 (0.69 to 1.04)                    | 1.00 (0.819 to 1.24)                | 77.8 (80.4, 74.6)      | 1.39 (0.87 to 2.23)                    | 1.70 (0.99 to 2.77)                    | 75.7 (73.3, 78.3)         | 0.76 (0.54 to 1.30)                   | 0.97 (0.54 to 1.73)                  |
| Core surgical           | 13.8 (8.8, 20.8)       | 0.37 (0.32 to 0.42)**                  | 0.38 (0.33 to 0.44)**               | 64.9 (64.8, 65.1)      | 0.99 (0.76 to 1.29)                    | 1.05 (0.78 to 1.40)                    | 77.1 (80.3, 75.3)         | 1.34 (0.92 to 1.96)                   | 1.25 (0.82 to 1.87)                  |
| GP                      | 43.4 (47.5, 37.5)      | 1.51 (1.38 to 1.66)**                  | 1.53 (1.39 to 1.69)**               | 74.5 (76.8, 70.2)      | 1.42 (1.21 to 1.68)**                  | 1.23 (1.03 to 1.46)*                   | 87.1 (88.3, 84.9)         | 1.34 (1.05 to 1.70)*                  | 1.37 (1.05 to 1.79)*                 |
| O&G                     | 4.8 (7.0, 1.7)         | 4.33 (3.24 to 5.79)**                  | 4.28 (3.18 to 5.76)**               | 59.7 (69.9, 58.2)      | 1.08 (0.60 to 1.92)                    | 1.00 (0.51 to 1.95)                    | 77.6 (77.0, 81.3)         | 1.77 (0.29 to 1.99)                   | 0.88 (0.30 to 2.60)                  |
| Paediatrics             | 8.3 (10.7, 4.9)**      | 2.34 (1.94 to 2.82)**                  | 2.22 (1.82 to 2.71)**               | 76.2 (78.3, 69.9)      | 1.56 (1.04 to 2.34)*                   | 1.57 (1.01 to 2.46)*                    | 76.5 (75.8, 78.9)         | 0.84 (0.49 to 1.40)                   | 0.72 (0.40 to 1.27)                  |

Odds adjusted for year of birth, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, premedical school attainment, graduate status, premedical school country of domicile, medical school attended, Foundation Programme Application Scores and medical school fitness to practise declaration.

Statistically significant values in bold: *p<0.05; **p<0.001.

ACCS EM, acute care common stem emergency medicine; GP, general practice; O&G, obstetrics and gynaecology.
Across all specialties, sex was not related to whether any application versus none was made (p=0.25), but women were more likely to get at least one offer versus none (OR=1.40; 95% CI=1.25 to 1.58; p<0.001) and to accept an offer versus none (OR=1.54; 95% CI=1.30 to 1.84; p<0.001). There were significant sex differences in applications to seven of the nine largest specialties (women favouring GP, O&G, paediatrics and men favouring ACCS EM, clinical radiology, core anaesthetics training and core surgical training), sex differences in offers to two (GP and paediatrics, both favouring women) and sex differences in acceptances to two (GP and ACCS EM, both with more women accepting). See table 2 for details.

Doctor who had not applied for specialty training had lower HESA tariff points (p<0.001), UKCAT score (p<0.001) and FPAS degree points (p<0.001) than those who had. There was no difference in EPM (p=0.23) or SJT scores (p=0.13).

There were significant differences by medical school on all predictor variables, including the proportion of women (range: 44.7 to 67.0; p<0.001), average prior attainment (all measures significant at p<0.001) and the proportion with an FtP declaration (range: 3.5% to 16.7%; p<0.001). Medical schools also differed in the proportion of their graduates who applied to specialty training (range: 62.5% to 87.4%; p<0.001), received an offer (range: 65.0% to 92.9%; p<0.001) and accepted an offer (range: 83.5% to 95.7%; p<0.001). All the nine largest specialties except core anaesthetics, O&G and paediatrics showed significant medical school differences in applications. By contrast, only core medical training, core surgical training and GP showed medical school differences in offers, and only ACCS EM, core surgical training and GP showed medical school differences in acceptances. Only GP and core surgical training showed medical school differences in applications, offers and acceptances.

Table 3  Mixed effects logistic regression of medical school (random effect), demographics, prior attainment and fitness to practise declaration (fixed effects) on the probability of applying to specialty training versus not applying (n=10 559)

| Variable                      | Estimate | SE       | OR         | Lower 95% CI | Upper 95% CI | P value |
|-------------------------------|----------|----------|------------|--------------|--------------|---------|
| Female                        | -0.0633  | 0.0477   | 0.9387     | 0.8549       | 1.0307       | 0.1847  |
| HESA tariff**                 | 0.0008   | 0.0003   | 1.0008     | 1.0003       | 1.0013       | 0.0009  |
| UKCAT score**                 | -0.0003  | 0.0001   | 1.0008     | 1.0003       | 1.0013       | 0.0009  |
| EPM score**                   | 0.0495   | 0.0095   | 1.0508     | 1.0313       | 1.0705       | 0.0001  |
| SJT score*                    | -0.0295  | 0.0096   | 0.9709     | 0.9528       | 0.9894       | 0.0021  |
| Degree points**               | -0.7255  | 0.0417   | 0.4841     | 0.4461       | 0.5253       | <0.0001 |
| Publication points**          | 0.3047   | 0.0573   | 1.3562     | 1.2122       | 1.5174       | <0.0001 |
| UK domicile**                 | 0.3104   | 0.0862   | 1.1610     | 0.9372       | 1.4382       | 0.0003  |
| Graduate entry**              | 0.7103   | 0.0785   | 2.0346     | 1.7445       | 2.3729       | <0.0001 |
| Birth year**                  | -0.0750  | 0.0044   | 0.9278     | 0.9198       | 0.9358       | <0.0001 |
| BME                           | -0.0056  | 0.0031   | 0.9944     | 0.9883       | 1.0004       | 0.0689  |
| High SEC*                     | -0.1126  | 0.0561   | 0.8935     | 0.8005       | 0.9973       | 0.0446  |
| Fee paying school             | -0.0678  | 0.0538   | 0.9345     | 0.8410       | 1.0384       | 0.2078  |
| No free school meals          | 0.0412   | 0.0946   | 0.9597     | 0.7972       | 1.1552       | 0.6633  |
| High local participation (POLAR)* | -0.2866  | 0.1284   | 0.7508     | 0.5838       | 0.9657       | 0.0256  |
| FtP declaration*              | -0.1715  | 0.0871   | 0.8424     | 0.7102       | 0.9992       | 0.0489  |

The random effect of medical school was highly statistically significant (p<0.0001). Statistically significant fixed effects in bold: *p<0.05; **p<0.001.

BME, black and minority ethnic; EPM, Educational Performance Measure; FtP, fitness to practise; HESA, Higher Education Statistics Agency; POLAR, participation of local areas; SEC, socioeconomic class; SJT, Situational Judgement Tests; UKCAT, UK Clinical Aptitude Test.

Univariate results

Across all specialties, sex was not related to whether any application versus none was made (p=0.25), but women were more likely to get at least one offer versus none (OR=1.40; 95% CI=1.25 to 1.58; p<0.001) and to accept an offer versus none (OR=1.54; 95% CI=1.30 to 1.84; p<0.001). There were significant sex differences in applications to seven of the nine largest specialties (women favouring GP, O&G, paediatrics and men favouring ACCS EM, clinical radiology, core anaesthetics training and core surgical training), sex differences in offers to two (GP and paediatrics, both favouring women) and sex differences in acceptances to two (GP and ACCS EM, both with more women accepting). See table 2 for details.

GP was the only specialty that showed a significant sex difference in applications (unadjusted OR=1.51; 95% CI=1.37 to 1.66; p<0.001), offers (unadjusted OR=1.42; 95% CI=1.21 to 1.66; p<0.001) and acceptances (unadjusted OR=1.34; 95% CI=1.05 to 1.70; p=0.03), with all favouring women.

There were various sex differences in prior attainment. At application to medical school, men in the sample had on average 36 more UKCAT points than women (p<0.001), but their HESA tariff points were not statistically different, and they were no more likely to have a degree at entry to medical school. At application to Foundation Training, women had higher EPM (p<0.001) and SJT scores (p<0.001), whereas men had more publications (p=0.007) and degree points (p<0.001). Men were significantly more likely to have a FtP declaration (OR=2.12; 95% CI=1.82 to 2.45; p<0.001).

Doctors who had not applied for specialty training had lower HESA tariff points (p<0.001), UKCAT score (p<0.001) and FPAS degree points (p<0.001) than those who had. There was no difference in EPM (p=0.23) or SJT scores (p=0.13).

There were significant differences by medical school on all predictor variables, including the proportion of women (range: 44.7 to 67.0; p<0.001), average prior attainment (all measures significant at p<0.001) and the proportion with an FtP declaration (range: 3.5% to 16.7%; p<0.001). Medical schools also differed in the proportion of their graduates who applied to specialty training (range: 62.5% to 87.4%; p<0.001), received an offer (range: 65.0% to 92.9%; p<0.001) and accepted an offer (range: 83.5% to 95.7%; p<0.001). All the nine largest specialties except core anaesthetics, O&G and paediatrics showed significant medical school differences in applications. By contrast, only core medical training, core surgical training and GP showed medical school differences in offers, and only ACCS EM, core surgical training and GP showed medical school differences in acceptances. Only GP and core surgical training showed medical school differences in applications, offers and acceptances.
Multivariate results

Sex differences in applications remained in the same seven specialties with similar magnitudes after controlling for medical school attended, prior attainment and demographics. The only specialties showing sex differences in offers were GP and Paediatrics, both favouring women. In the fully adjusted models, the only specialty to show sex differences beyond offers was GP, women being more likely to apply (odds=1.51; 95% CI=1.37 to 1.67; p<0.001), to be offered a place (odds=1.29; 95% CI=1.03 to 1.11; p=0.004) and to accept an offer (odds=1.34; 95% CI=1.05 to 1.70; p<0.05) to GP training. See table 2.

Doctors with a medical school FtP declaration were slightly less likely to apply to specialty training overall (OR=0.84; 95% CI=0.71 to 1.00; p=0.048). Of those who did apply, having a FtP declaration was a small predictor of applying to ACCS Emergency Medicine (odds=1.39; 95% CI=1.01 to 1.92; p=0.046). Of those who received an offer to any specialty, those with a FtP declaration were slightly less likely to accept (odds=0.71; 95% CI=0.52 to 0.98; p=0.036), after adjusting for all other factors. It is important to bear in mind in interpreting these findings that we performed a large number of tests, with analyses done for all specialties and then repeated for each of nine specialties separately, increasing the probability of getting a statistically significant result by chance alone (ie, increasing the chance of type I error). Significant independent predictors of applying, being offered a place and accepting a place on any specialty are shown in tables 3-5.

**Discussion**

There were significant sex differences in the specialty applications of this sample of 10 559 UK medical graduates. Women were more likely to apply to GP, O&G and paediatrics, and men were more likely to apply to core surgical training, ACCS EM and clinical radiology. Women were more likely to receive an offer versus none, and to receive an offer in GP and paediatrics specifically. Women were more likely to accept an offer if they received one, and to accept an offer in GP specifically. Sex differences largely remained after controlling for prior academic attainment and having a FtP declaration, as well as medical school attended and other demographics. In the fully adjusted models, GP was the only specialty with significant sex differences at all three stages: applications, offers and acceptances; women being more likely to apply and to accept an offer, and also being more likely to be offered a place. Having a FtP declaration was a small predictor of not applying to specialty training, and of rejecting an offer across all specialties, although the large number of tests performed increases the possibility that this was due to type I error.
The raw sex differences in applications are consistent with previous research from the UK and other countries. Our finding that women were more likely than men to get an offer in GP selection, but not in selection for core surgical training reflects Davison and colleagues’ analysis of national data but differs from Thomas and colleagues’ analysis of a smaller subsample. To our knowledge this is the first study to assess sex differences in the likelihood of receiving and accepting an offer to specialty training after controlling for prior attainment, as well as controlling for medical school, other demographics and a measure of medical school professionalism. It is also the first that we know of to assess whether FtP issues at medical school predict specialty preferences and selection outcomes.

A considerable strength of the study is the large sample size (three quarters of all entrants to medical school from 2007 to 2008) and the longitudinal nature of the data, obtained from the UKMED. This made it possible to examine recruitment to nine different specialties in the UK. It also meant we could conduct multivariate analyses to understand whether sex segregation in some specialties is due to sex differences on the potential confounder of academic attainment, both prior to and during medical school. Because UKMED data are collected by the GMC as part of their statutory duty to regulate medical education in the UK, we did not have to rely on voluntary completion of surveys for data, unlike previous analyses.

The study has some methodological weaknesses. We did not consider multiple applications or acceptances from multiple offers. Seventy per cent of doctors in our sample applied to one specialty only, and this did not differ by sex (p=0.77); however, it is likely that the number of multiple applications varies by specialty. For example, a previous study using the same dataset but looking only at GP applicants found that only 59% (vs 70%) made a single specialty training application; however, women were more likely to apply to GP after controlling for prior attainment and other demographics regardless of whether they had applied to multiple specialties or not. We also did not formally compare sex differences between specialties taking into account competition ratios, and we only analysed data from first applications. Since women were more likely to receive and accept and offer first time around, it is possible that men are more likely to apply a second time around, which may then influence the final proportions of men and women in different specialties.

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| **Table 5** Mixed effects logistic regression of medical school (random effect), demographics, prior attainment and fitness to practise declaration (fixed effects) on the probability of accepting an offer to specialty training or not (n=6208) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | Estimate | SE | OR | Lower 95% CI | Upper 95% CI | P value |
| Female** | 0.3868 | 0.0935 | 1.4723 | 1.2259 | 1.7682 | <0.0001 |
| HESA tariff | −0.0004 | 0.0005 | 0.9996 | 0.9987 | 1.0005 | 0.3316 |
| UKCAT score | −0.0001 | 0.0002 | 0.9999 | 0.9994 | 1.0003 | 0.5447 |
| EPM score | 0.0476 | 0.0189 | 1.0487 | 1.0106 | 1.0883 | 0.0117 |
| SJT score | −0.0264 | 0.0194 | 0.9740 | 0.9377 | 1.0117 | 0.1739 |
| Degree points** | −0.4350 | 0.0798 | 0.6472 | 0.5535 | 0.7569 | <0.0001 |
| Publication points* | −0.2472 | 0.1068 | 0.7810 | 0.6335 | 0.9628 | 0.0206 |
| Non-UK domicile* | −0.3161 | 0.1451 | 0.7290 | 0.5486 | 0.9687 | 0.0293 |
| Graduate entry | 0.2617 | 0.1433 | 1.2991 | 0.9810 | 1.7204 | 0.0678 |
| Birth year** | −0.0344 | 0.0007 | 0.9662 | 0.9649 | 0.9675 | <0.0001 |
| BME | 0.0115 | 0.0095 | 1.0116 | 0.9930 | 1.0306 | 0.2244 |
| High SEC | −0.1424 | 0.1141 | 0.8673 | 0.6934 | 1.0846 | 0.2120 |
| Fee paying school | −0.1802 | 0.1067 | 0.8351 | 0.6775 | 1.0294 | 0.0913 |
| No free school meals | 0.1407 | 0.1771 | 1.1511 | 0.8135 | 1.6287 | 0.4270 |
| High local participation (POLAR) | 0.0170 | 0.2402 | 1.0172 | 0.6352 | 1.6288 | 0.9436 |
| FtP declaration* | −0.3379 | 0.1608 | 0.7133 | 0.5205 | 0.9775 | 0.0356 |

Statistically significant fixed effects in bold: *p<0.05; **p<0.001. The effect of medical school was statistically significant at p<0.007. BME, black and minority ethnic; EPM, Educational Performance Measure; FtP, fitness to practise; HESA, Higher Education Statistics Agency; POLAR, participation of local areas; SEC, socioeconomic class; SJT, Situational Judgement Tests; UKCAT, UK Clinical Aptitude Test.
also considerable amounts of missing data on some variables, in particular because some of the cohorts within the sample had not taken a test, with multiple imputation used to avoid excluding large amounts of data. Our dataset was truncated because we could only include graduates who were eligible to apply to specialty training by 2015. The study findings are not generalisable outside of the UK.

This study suggests that sex differences in specialty applications and outcomes are driven largely by factors unmeasured in this study, and not by academic, demographic or medical school differences. In terms of differential applications, previous research has shown that these factors are likely to include how ‘plannable’, technical and people-oriented a specialty is, the career prospects a specialty offers, a trainee’s domestic circumstances and their perceptions of their own ability and interests. There is also evidence that, while some specialties such as surgery and paediatrics show sex differences very early in medical school training, experiences during medical school and postgraduate training can influence specialty choices. This suggests that efforts to reduce sex segregation should focus on understanding and addressing medical career choice early on, as well as on understanding whether men and women have different experiences during training, and on removing any perceived or real barriers to career progression and enjoyment within sex-segregated specialties.

It is unclear why women were more likely to receive an offer, and to accept an offer compared with men. The sex differences in GP were the most striking of any of the nine largest specialties, and this itself requires more research to understand. It is important to note that sex differences in applications and acceptances are the result of doctors’ choices, which themselves are underpinned by sociological and educational factors; whereas sex differences in offers reflect the specialty selection processes. GP selection comprises written and face-to-face assessments, and potential sex differences on those assessments were not taken into account in our analysis of offers. Performance in GP selection has been found to predict subsequent performance in the Membership of the Royal College of General Practitioners exit examinations, in which women outperform men. As such, the relationship between sex differences in offers and sex differences within GP training also merits further exploration.

CONCLUSIONS

Sex differences in specialty applications, offers and acceptances result from factors other than prior academic attainment, medical school FtP declarations, medical school and other demographics. GP was the only specialty with significant sex differences in applications, offers and acceptances: women were more likely to apply; of those who applied, women were more likely to be offered a place; and of those offered a place, women were more likely to accept. Further research exploring the reasons underlying sex differences in applications and acceptances, as well as the differences in offers within GP and paediatrics, is important for future work place planning and equity.

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Contributors KK, CV and EU conceived of the study and EU wrote the first draft of the original protocol. KK, CV, HP, KW and HJ designed the data analysis, with KW and HJ conducting the data analysis. KW wrote the first draft of the report. All authors read and approved the final version of the article. KW is the article guarantor.

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Data sharing statement Data files used in the study are securely held by the UK Medical Education Database and cannot be shared by the authors, but are available via application (see www.ukmed.ac.uk).

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