CAREER PREFERENCE ENQUIRY
AMONG QUEEN'S UNIVERSITY MEDICAL
UNDERGRADUATES AND GRADUATES: STAGE III*

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IN an attempt to obtain a better understanding of the factors which influence career decisions and stability of choice, Northern Ireland Council for Postgraduate Medical Education, in conjunction with the Faculty of Medicine at Queen's University, undertook a longitudinal survey of career preferences and desired location of practice of three cohorts of Queen's medical undergraduates in 1977. Questionnaires were distributed in the first instance to all second, fourth and final year students (Egerton, 1979) and in 1979 all those who had participated in the first stage were contacted again (Egerton, 1983). In 1981 all the 1979 respondents were contacted in this, the third stage.

METHOD

Questionnaires were distributed to 131 final year students, 113 1979 graduates and 103 1977 graduates eliciting a response of 125 from the students and 113 and 88 respectively from the doctors. Individual replies were matched with questionnaires returned in the first two stages and changes noted.

RESULTS

Apart from background information common to both, students and qualified doctors are dealt with separately in this section.

The mean ages of the three groups were 24, 26 and 28 and approximately one-third in each group was female. Predictably, the proportion of married respondents increased in accordance with age and income: 12 per cent in final year, 46 per cent among 1979 graduates and 64.8 per cent among 1977 graduates. One hundred and fifteen of the students, 106 of the 1979 graduates and 86 of the 1977 graduates were natives of Northern Ireland.

GRADUATES

Postgraduate Qualifications. Seventy of the 1977 graduates had obtained at least one postgraduate qualification and in some cases three, four years after graduating. Ten had obtained Primary FRCS; 2 Final FRCS; 4 Primary FFARCS; 1 Final FFARCS; 6 Primary FRCR; 23 MRCP Part I; 12 MRCP Part II; 4 MRCOG Part I; 2 MRCPath Part I; 4 MRCPsych Part I; 3 MRCGP; 18 DRCOG; 8 DCH and 1 DLD. There is little difference in the figures for men and women in this group: 84.2 per cent of the single men, 76.3 per cent of the married men, 90.9 per cent of the single women and 75 per cent of the married women had obtained at least one postgraduate qualification. The average numbers of qualifications, based on those who had obtained one or more were as follows: single men 1.3; married men 1.5; single women 1.5 and married women 1.4.

*This paper is a summary of a fuller report prepared for the DHSS (NI), copies of which are available on request from Northern Ireland Council.
Thirty of the 1979 graduates had obtained a postgraduate qualification two years after graduating; no-one had more than one. One had obtained an MD; 6 Primary FRCS; 4 Primary FFRACS; 7 MRCP Part I; 11 DRCOG; and 1 DCH. Just over 23 per cent of the single men, 41.2 per cent of the married men: 20 per cent of the single women and 15.8 per cent of the married women had a postgraduate qualification.

**Present Employment among Qualified Doctors.** Eighty-one of the 1977 graduates were working full-time, three (women) were not working and four (women also) were working part-time. One hundred and seven graduates were working full-time, two women were on maternity leave, two women were not working and one man and one woman were working part-time.

Those who were working in both cohorts were asked to indicate the type of work they were doing (or their main employment, if engaged in more than one field), the grade of their present post, whether they intended to practice this field ultimately, and if not, which other areas of medicine they were considering. In both groups, general practice had attracted the greatest number (a total of 24.5 per cent) and medicine the next greatest (a total of 21.9 per cent). Among the 1977 group, radiology/radiotherapy was third with 10.5 per cent, and in the 1979 group, surgery was third with 10.8 per cent. Of the 1977 group 56.5 per cent were in registrar posts and 18.8 per cent were general practice trainees. Seventy-three per cent of the 1977 group were in SHO posts and 18 per cent were general practice trainees; 64.7 per cent were working in the same specialty as two years previously and 78.8 per cent intended to continue in the same specialty. Of the 1979 group 36.9 per cent were working in the specialty they had chosen two years previously and 55.9 per cent intended to continue in the same specialty. Two-thirds of the 67 doctors in the two groups who wished to change to another specialty or who were still undecided were considering general practice. A comparison of the results from the 1977, 1979 and 1981 studies shows that 34.1 per cent of the 1977 graduates and 17.1 per cent of the 1979 graduates were consistent in all three stages. The only specialties where respondents showed any degree of consistency were general practice, medicine and surgery in that order.

**Present Location of Qualified Doctors.** Of the 192 graduates originating from Northern Ireland 171 were resident in the province at the time of completing the questionnaire. Sixteen were in Great Britain or the Republic of Ireland, two in Europe, one in Africa and two in unspecified countries abroad.

**Factors Influencing Decision to Leave the Province.** Those who were living outside Northern Ireland were asked to indicate on a given list factors which influenced their decision to leave. Where a respondent has given more than one reason, he is counted more than once in the Table. Reasons listed under "others" are as follows. Five wished to broaden their experience both professionally and personally. Two left to join general practice vocational training schemes in England and Scotland because there were no posts available here. Three were in the Armed Forces and one left because of the political violence.

**Ultimate Location of Practice.** Of the 171 Northern Ireland-born graduates who were resident here, 67.3 per cent planned to remain in the province in the long term;
15.2 per cent said they intended to leave, and the remainder had no strong feelings. Comparison of these figures with those of the previous studies showed that there was little change in either group between 1979 and 1981, after fairly dramatic increases in those wishing to stay here between 1977 and 1979. This stabilization is probably related more to the world job market than any other single factor. Certainly the turbulent political situation in Ulster has not been quoted as a major reason for emigration in any of the three studies conducted on Queen's graduates between 1977 and the present day. None of the 21 Northern Ireland-born graduates living outside the province had definite plans to return. One said he probably would, 11 said they might possibly, and the remainder said a definite no in answer to this question.

**UNDERGRADUATES**

*Students' Current Career Preferences.* Twenty-three of the 125 students claimed to have decided definitely on the broad field of medicine in which they wished to make their career. Another 87 were interested in a particular field but were still undecided; 13 had as yet no strong preferences but had decided against certain fields and two were completely undecided. Students who had decided on, or were interested in, a particular field, were asked to list in order of preference three broad areas of medical practice from a given list of six. General practice grew considerably in popularity between fourth and final year, attracting almost as much interest in 1981 as clinical hospital work with continuing responsibility (defined as medicine, the surgical specialties, obstetrics and gynaecology, paediatrics and psychiatry). The first two stages of this survey indicated that 25 per cent of the 1977 final year chose general practice and 50 per cent clinical hospital work with continuing responsibility; 30 per cent of the final year chose general practice and 40 per cent clinical hospital work with continuing responsibility. The distribution of preferences appears then to be changing steadily in favour of general practice, with little interest existing in areas other than these two, even as second preference. A few were willing to consider clinical hospital work with continuing responsibility (used in a broad sense to refer to radiology, anaesthetics and laboratory medicine) and community medicine as third choices but the majority did not state a third preference.
Those who had indicated a preference for a broad area of practice were then invited to specify three specialties in order of preference from a given list. The most notable points were the increased interest in general practice between 1979 and 1981 and the drop in popularity of surgery. On this occasion as in previous surveys there was a comparative lack of interest in anything outside general practice, medicine and surgery. The distribution of preferences of the 1981 final year students is similar to that of the 1979 final year: general practice 38.4 per cent in 1981 and 31.2 per cent in 1979; medicine 17.6 per cent in 1981 and 15.3 per cent in 1979; and surgery 8 per cent in 1981 and 9.9 per cent in 1979. Interest in specialties other than these three dropped from 27.4 per cent among the 1979 final year to 20.8 per cent among the 1981 final year. It was found in the second stage of the study that the preferences of the cohort at present under review had changed between second year (1977) and 1979 (fourth year) to form a pattern similar to that of the 1977 fourth year students. The further change between 1979 and 1981, forming a pattern similar to that of the 1979 final year students appears to reinforce the hypothesis suggested in the last report: that undergraduate career preferences may conform to a pattern, determined presumably by the emphasis given on the curriculum to the various specialties from year to year and by the influence of teachers.

Of the respondents 21.6 per cent were consistent between 1979 and 1981, (13 in general practice, 7 in medicine, 5 in surgery, 1 in ophthalmology and 1 in surgery). Only 7.2 per cent were consistent in all three stages of the survey (4 in general practice, 3 in surgery and 2 in medicine). Respondents were next asked to indicate specialties they had decided against. As with the final year students of 1979 it was the surgical specialties which fell most from favour, surgery, ophthalmology and otorhinolaryngology being discounted by an additional 22 to 25 per cent.

**Intended Location of Practice.** The number of final year Northern Ireland-born students intending to stay here has risen from 47.8 per cent in 1979 to 65.2 per cent in 1981. The number wishing to leave has dropped from 18.3 per cent in 1979 to 10.4 per cent in 1981. The first two stages of this survey showed that the number of final year students intending to emigrate fell also between 1977 and 1979. The increasing difficulty in entering North America, traditionally the most favoured destination after Great Britain, probably accounts, in part, for this trend. Of the 1981 final year students wishing to leave, 6 wanted to go to Great Britain, 3 to Australia/New Zealand, 1 to Canada, 1 to the United States and 1 to India. Twenty-eight had no strong feelings about long-term location of practice.

**DISCUSSION**

A tabulation of all three groups under review and the percentage remaining stable at each point in the survey, 1977, 1979 and 1981, shows that, in every case except one stability of specialty choice increases predictably with maturity and in relation to work experience. The one irregularity is the decrease in 1981 for the final year students. This lapse in stability is undoubtedly explicable in terms of the recent uncertainty among the student population about the job situation. Comments on the questionnaires suggest that the prevailing attitude is now to keep an open mind until one sees what is available.

Comparable with this study is one of the series of longitudinal surveys which have been conducted in Great Britain by Professor Parkhouse and his colleagues.
ultimately, the time of graduation, attitudes towards specialty choices have been influenced by the time and emphasis allocated to particular subjects on the curriculum and possibly also by the enthusiasms and prejudices of the teachers. Attitudes towards various specialties are clearly open to influence during this period and it seems likely that the specialties receiving more time and emphasis assume more prestige in the students’ eyes. However, personal inclination is being modified increasingly among students and graduates by career opportunities. This is the final stage of the study to look at all three groups. It is planned in 1983 to concentrate on the 1977 graduates, examining more closely six years after graduation the reasons for their choice of specialty.

SUMMARY

Questionnaires were distributed in 1981 to selected final year students and doctors who graduated in 1977 and 1979 in the third leg of a longitudinal career preference enquiry at Queen’s University medical school. Replies were obtained from 95.4 per cent of the undergraduates and from 86.3 per cent and 85.4 per cent respectively of the qualified doctors. Seven per cent of the undergraduates, 17 per cent of the 1979 graduates and 34 per cent of the 1977 graduates were consistent in choice of specialty in all three stages. Eighty-eight per cent of the graduates were resident here at the time of completing the questionnaire and 60 per cent intended to practice here ultimately, the same proportions exactly as in 1979.

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