

# General Practice Career Intentions among Graduate-Entry Students: A Cross-Sectional Study at Ireland's Newest Medical School

## Abstract:

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## Abstract

Increased care provision and clinical activity in General Practice in Ireland will have important manpower implications. Recent developments in medical education policy including the introduction of graduate-entry medical degree programmes may help address this issue. The aim of this study was to determine GP career intentions among students on an Irish graduate-entry medical degree programme and to identify factors that influence these. An electronic cross-sectional study of students at University of Limerick Graduate-Entry Medical School (UL-GEMS) was undertaken. We received 139 replies (78% response rate). 41(29%) reported GP was their current preferred career choice, while 29(19%) reported it was their preferred career choice on entry to medical school. This first study to present data on GP career intentions among graduate-entry students in Ireland highlights the specialty as a popular preferred career choice among students, both on entry to, and during medical school. The study also identifies factors which are likely to be important in determining career intentions. Further research to examine this issue at other graduate-entry medical schools in Ireland and to determine whether our findings are pursued over time amongst graduates is a priority.

## Introduction

The introduction of graduate-entry medical degree curricula in Ireland is an exciting policy development with many challenges and opportunities. In response to Ireland's anticipated manpower shortage in General Practice,<sup>2,3</sup> the report of the Postgraduate Medical Education and Training Group (the Buttimer Report<sup>4</sup>) recommended an increase in the number of specialist training places in general practice.<sup>5</sup> With the availability of GPs expected to decline further in the next decade (with a high proportion retiring by 2020),<sup>5</sup> Ireland's population predicted to rise by 47% between 2010 and 2060 and the number of GP consultations predicted to increase by one-third by 2021,<sup>5</sup> this policy was timely. Thus, encouraging new graduates to pursue a career in general practice is a priority and educational innovations that help achieve this goal are of value.

It is unclear whether graduate-entry programmes have succeeded in this regard. To date no data has reported the GP-related career intentions of graduates of such programmes in Ireland. Previous research from the UK suggests that increasing graduate-entry to medical schools may increase the percentage of doctors who want to become GPs and that this effect is age-independent.<sup>7,8</sup> An additional key feature of the curriculum at UL-GEMS is increased student exposure to General Practice. In other settings, such exposure increases interest in General Practice as a career choice,<sup>9</sup> but it is unclear whether this a transient finding or one that results in a sustained influence on career choice.<sup>10</sup> An Australian study noted that appropriately timed, relevant and positive exposures to general practice during medical training, may lead to more students considering it as a career.<sup>11</sup> These issues prompted the researchers to undertake a study to provide insight into the career intentions of current students and the factors that determine these choices.

## Methods

We conducted a cross-sectional study, involving an online questionnaire survey of students in Years 1 and 4 of the MB BS degree programme at UL-GEMS in Semester II of academic year 2011-12. Established in 2007, UL-GEMS operates a four-year graduate-entry only programme. All students in Years 1 and 4 of the programme (N=179) were sent information on the study with an attached invitation to participate through an online link to the questionnaire. There were no specific exclusion criteria. Brief information sessions with both classes were given so as to inform them of the study's aims with a view to maximising response rates.

The questionnaire content was informed by previous studies of undergraduate medical students and by a pilot study.<sup>12,13</sup> The questionnaire elicited information on demographics, exposure to General Practice and career intentions. Participants in the study were asked to indicate how important possible factors were in influencing career intentions on a five-point Likert<sup>14</sup> scale (where 1=not at all important and 5=very important). A free-text section was also included to identify any other influential factors not mentioned in the questionnaire. All students would have had exposure to general practice through either the Early Patient Contact Programme (ECPC) which is delivered in Year 1 and 2, or through the Year 3 General Practice module, which includes a one-semester 18 week clinical placement in an affiliated teaching practice. Descriptive analyses were performed using Microsoft Excel/PASW (SPSS). The effects of key variables on career intentions were examined by comparing median scores on a Likert scale. The study was reviewed and approved by the UL Faculty of Education & Health Sciences Research Ethics Committee.

## Results

### Characteristics of Study Population

We received a total of 139 valid replies (78% response rate), of whom 82(59%) were female, 99(72%) were EU citizens, 80(58%) were aged 25-29 and 72(52%) had a Life Sciences primary degree.

### Career preferences

A total of 114(82%) of students had an opinion on current career choice; 41(29%) reported General Practice was their current preferred career choice, followed by Medicine (16%), Paediatrics (11%) and Surgery (9%). A total of 71(51%) reported a preferred career option prior to commencing medical school, 26(19%) reporting this was General Practice, followed by Medicine (8%), Paediatrics (7%) and Surgery (7%) (see Table 1).

Job satisfaction, lifestyle choice, and work that allows for family commitments were the most important factors among respondents who wished to pursue a career in General Practice. Other factors which rated as being more important among students who wished to pursue a career in General Practice included: flexible working arrangements (ranks 5 versus 13), duration of specialist training (ranks 7 versus 16) and practice in the community (ranks 11 versus 20). For those choosing alternative specialities job satisfaction also ranked highest, while enthusiasm/commitment to the speciality (ranks 2 versus 6), experience as a student (ranks 7 versus 14) and self-appraisal of own skills/aptitudes (ranks 4 versus 12) all ranked higher. Thematic analysis of free text answers identified other factors as important in determining career preference, including: competition to enter specialist training, availability of speciality training, stress in the speciality, interaction with clinical teams while on placement and job security.

## Discussion

The first study to offer an insight into the current thinking among graduate-entry medical students in Ireland, indicates that 29% of students on a graduate-entry programme with a strong General Practice component intend to pursue a career in General Practice, with 19% of students reporting this as their preferred career option on entry to medical school. These findings mirror those of Lambert et al who identified that 29% of first year qualified doctors surveyed between 1993 and 2009 had general practice as their chosen career choice.<sup>15</sup> In this UK study, this figure was seen to rise to 31% and 35% after respondents were resurveyed after 3 and 5 years post qualification respectively. This Irish study therefore identifies that General Practice is as popular a career choice for students on a graduate-entry programme as among recently qualified doctors in the UK. While factors such as job satisfaction, enthusiasm/commitment for the chosen speciality, daily practice variety and professional autonomy were important in determining career preference among all students, among those who indicated that General Practice was their intended career speciality, lifestyle choice (median score 4.49 compared to 3.68), work that allows for family commitments (4.43 compared to 3.73) and flexible working arrangements (4.02 compared to 3.45) all scored higher. This study thus confirms the importance of factors outside of the work environment, in those pursuing a career in general practice.

Other influential factors that students identified allow a unique contemporary insight into issues that are important to them. Availability of spaces on specialist training schemes and difficulty accessing these are important issues. This first study to present data on General Practice career intentions among students on a graduate-entry programme in Ireland highlights General Practice as the most popular career choice among such students, both at entry to medical school and during the programme. This study suggests increasing student exposure to General Practice may increase the number of medical graduates who wish to pursue a career in this discipline and identifies important factors that influence career choice. That this study was conducted at one medical school is a methodological consideration that may limit the generalisability of our findings; though enacting the study at one site is likely to have contributed to the high response rate and yielded data on a unique student group. Nonetheless, we suggest further research at other medical schools to involve different student populations. Such research should adopt both cross sectional and longitudinal approaches to determine if these career intentions are pursued over time and will be of value in informing future manpower planning.

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