



Speakers' Corner - Undergraduate teaching in General Practice. Your medical school needs you!

This month Joe Rosenthal, Senior Lecturer in General Practice & Sub-Dean for Community Based Teaching at UCL Medical School, gives us his view of undergraduate teaching in general practice.

Undergraduate education in general practice is under pressure and needs your help!

Between the 1980s and the early 2000s there was a major expansion in GP based undergraduate teaching. This welcome and necessary expansion has however slowed down, and recent evidence suggests that overall medical student exposure to general practice has dropped in the last 10 years. The reason for this reduction is not resistance from medical schools who are generally keen to promote GP teaching. The problem is recruiting sufficient numbers of GPs willing and able to provide placements. Capacity for placing medical students in terms of space, time and energy is understandably being squeezed by the many competing demands on general practice, not only from clinical service but also the introduction of foundation placements in general practice and large increases in postgraduate teaching.

We must recognise however, that if we as a professional group do not engage in the training of tomorrow's doctors the future of our discipline may well be at risk.

Apart from our huge potential as GPs to teach medicine in its broadest sense to future doctors of all kinds we can also inform them in terms of their eventual career choices within medicine. UK general practice is facing a recruitment crisis and the Department of Health has tasked Health Education England to ensure that 50% of UK graduates enter general practice training. Given that historically the proportion that enters general practice has fallen far short of this target, and the fact that morale in the profession is currently at a seriously low ebb, this is a tall order.

The recent GP Taskforce report providing guidance on increasing GP numbers has made several useful recommendations amongst which the promotion of general practice as a career is arguably the most important. We need more doctors who want to be GPs. We know that undergraduate experiences shape career choices and that high quality undergraduate experiences in general practice encourage recruitment. This means we need more GPs to engage with their local medical schools to provide undergraduate placements and promote general practice as a positive career choice for students.

Can you help?

Benefits of undergraduate teaching

All medical schools provide payment for medical student teaching. The schools receive funding which is set nationally by the Department of Health (DH) and allocated locally via Health Education England (HEE). Whilst it is sadly true that payments for GP teaching have not increased for several years, the income from regular teaching can still be reasonably rewarding. These payments are currently under review nationally and we hope that they will increase in due course. There are however several other benefits to practices who get involved. Studies have shown that GPs involved in teaching find that having students in the practice gives them a sense of variety, achievement and enhanced self-esteem. GPs and other members of the practice involved in teaching feel more confident in their professional roles and the team ethic within the practice is strengthened. Patients have also been reported to feel more included in their care and to have enjoyed hearing their condition being discussed with the students. We also know that students value practice based learning, seeing common illnesses, chronic conditions and a variety of consulting styles.

There is no doubt that this morale boost is in part due to the contact with bright, enthusiastic students but teaching also reinforces knowledge and clinical skills that can lead to measurable benefit in patient care and help protect against burnout.

What to do now?

If you feel you could offer even occasional placements for medical students in your practice now is the time to raise your hand.

You can start by making contact with your local university medical school (see below). They will be able to explain the opportunities available and offer you the training needed for you to get involved. Here are the contacts for the GP teaching leads at all five London medical schools:

Imperial College London – sonia.kumar@imperial.ac.uk

Kings College London – anne.stephenson@kcl.ac.uk

St George’s University of London – abrown@sgul.ac.uk

UCL – j.rosenthal@ucl.ac.uk

We should all be delighted to hear from you!