Evaluation of an innovative recruitment initiative on the attitudes of medical students

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Evaluation of an Innovative Recruitment Initiative on the Attitudes of Medical Students

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Abstract
Some medical specialties struggle to recruit sufficient trainees to their postgraduate programmes. In many countries including Ireland, psychiatry is one of these specialties. A psychiatric summer school was developed by the trainee committee of the College of Psychiatry of Ireland as a recruitment initiative. All applicants were invited to complete a questionnaire prior, on the day of and three months after the summer school assessing their attitudes to a career in psychiatry. The mean score on the modified Nielson questionnaire in the pre-summer school group was 26.7 (SD +/- 3.8) and this rose significantly 28.3 (SD +/- 3.2) after completion of the summer school. 64% (n=31) of applicants to the summer school expressed an interest in a career in psychiatry. This rose to 88% (n=32) of those who attended. The findings of this study have national and international interest for all specialties who are struggling to recruit to their field.

Introduction
Some medical specialties are struggling to recruit trainees to their postgraduate programmes. In many countries including Ireland, the UK and Australia psychiatry is one of these specialties. The morning session was held in the CpsychI and included 2 consultant psychiatrists and one senior trainee discussing the breadth of a career in psychiatry. In the late morning students in groups of 4-6 accompanied by a trainee from the Trainee Committee visited different psychiatric services. Site visits included an acute psychiatric service, a drug and alcohol service, a neuropsychiatry department, a forensic service, a private psychiatric hospital and a day hospital. The students met with service users, psychiatrists and multidisciplinary team members. In the late afternoon the students returned to the College for a feedback session with trainees and the President of the College, followed by a social event where students had the opportunity to meet with other students, trainees and psychiatrists.

Methods
On the 25th and 26th of August 2011 a one day psychiatric summer school was held at the College of Psychiatry of Ireland (CpsychI). The aim of the school was to offer medical students a positive, diverse and inspiring experience of psychiatry and psychiatrists. Sessions were informal and offered plenty of opportunity for feedback and discussion. The aims of this study are to describe a recruitment innovation, evaluate the capacity of this innovation (a summer school) to affect student attitudes and to identify factors which influence medical student career choice.

Results
Response Rate
62 students applied to attend the summer school, of which 50 students (36 female, 14 male) anonymously completed the pre-summer school questionnaire online (81%). On the day of the summer school 38 (30 female, 8 male) of the 44 (86%) who attended completed the questionnaires. 26 students (20 female, 6 male) who attended and one student who did not attend the summer school completed the questionnaire online 3 months later (43.5% of applicants to attend summer school, 59% of summer school attendees). The demographic characteristics of all respondents is shown in Table 1.
Attitudes to psychiatry
In the pre-summer school sample the mean score on the modified Nielsen questionnaire was 26.7 (SD +/- 3.8) and this rose significantly (t= 2.06, p< 0.05) to 28.3 (SD +/- 3.2) after completion of the summer school. 3 months later the mean score remained significantly higher when compared to the pre-summer school mean of 28.5 (SD +/- 3.1), (t= 2.10, p= 0.05). Three of the ten items on the modified Nielsen questionnaire were significantly affected by attendance at the summer school. These are outlined in table 2.

In response to the question ‘How interested are you in a career in psychiatry?’ prior to the summer school 64% (n=31) of students applying stated they were interested/ very interested, after attendance at the summer school 88% (n=32) (p= 0.01) of students stated they were interested/ very interested while 3 months after the summer school 85% (n=23) (p=0.06) of students stated they were interested/ very interested in a career in psychiatry.

Factors influencing career choice
Personal interests was ranked first, followed by lifestyle, personal reasons, and aptitude in specialty. Selection factors that were considered less important were influence from a mentor, financial rewards, and prestige*. A summary of these findings is shown in Table 3.

Discussion
The higher than anticipated number of students applicants for this summer school during their summer holidays indicate an appetite for such events. The Irish medical students who applied and attended this summer school held positive attitudes to psychiatry, even before attendance as evidenced by their scores on the modified Nielsen questionnaire. These attitudes were comparable to those found in previous studies in Israel and the USA. The sample positively affected students’ attitudes to psychiatry both as a specialty and as a future career choice. While positive attitudinal change is a desired outcome of the summer school, the target outcome is that of increasing recruitment to the specialty. A similar recruitment initiative demonstrating a positive effect on recruitment, has been completed in Canada.

A summary of these findings is shown in Table 3.

Themes in the semi-structured component of questionnaire
In response to the question ‘What factors encourage you to consider a career in psychiatry?’ the most common responses volunteered were; an interest in the field (n= 40, 80%), the greater emphasis on the doctor-patient relationship (n= 10, 20%), lifestyle factors (n= 6, 12%), research opportunities (n= 4, 8%) and interface with the humanities (n=3, 6%). In response to the question ‘What factors discourage you from considering a career in psychiatry?’ the most common responses volunteered were; the emotional demands of the job (n=10, 20%), missing/ wasting medical training (n=5, 10%), colleagues/ publics poor opinion of the field (n=5, 10%), fear of dangerous patients (n=4, 8%), lack of resources (n=3, 6%).

In Ireland it will take a number of years before we will know whether this outcome has been achieved.

Two somewhat surprising results on individual items of the modified Nielsen questionnaire are worthy of comment. The number of students agreeing with the statement ‘If someone in my family was very emotionally upset, I would recommend a psychiatric consultation’, a possible explanation for this result is that the wording of the question did not indicate the presence of a mental illness. Thus students may have interpreted this result as referring to emotional upset in general rather than to emotional upset indicating a psychiatric consultation.

The feedback garnered from the students and the data included in this study will influence its’ content. If specialties like psychiatry are to address their recruitment difficulties they need to be innovative, focussed and develop an evidence base for recruitment initiatives.

The sample size was small and the participant rate for the three month follow up was low. The sample is a self selecting, Irish sample so the results may not be generalisable to other medical student groups or countries. The study relied on the respondents to self-report their attitudes to psychiatry and what influenced their career choices and these responses, could be subject to nondisclosure bias.

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**p<0.01
*p<0.05
Fishers exact test

Factors influencing career choice

Students stated: interess in the field - 80% (n=32), greater emphasis on the doctor-patient relationship - 20% (n=10), lifestyle factors - 12% (n=6), research opportunities - 8% (n=4), and interface with the humanities - 6% (n=3).

Factors discouraging career choice

Students stated: emotional demands of the job - 20% (n=10), missing/ wasting medical training - 10% (n=5), colleagues/ publics poor opinion of the field - 10% (n=5), fear of dangerous patients - 8% (n=4), lack of resources - 6% (n=3).

Themes in the semi-structured component of questionnaire

Students stated: interest in the field - 80% (n=32), greater emphasis on the doctor-patient relationship - 20% (n=10), lifestyle factors - 12% (n=6), research opportunities - 8% (n=4), and interface with the humanities - 6% (n=3).

Discussion

Two somewhat surprising results on individual items of the modified Nielsen questionnaire are worthy of comment. The number of students agreeing with the statement ‘If someone in my family was very emotionally upset, I would recommend a psychiatric consultation’, a possible explanation for this result is that the wording of the question did not indicate the presence of a mental illness. Thus students may have interpreted this question as referring to emotional upset in general rather than to emotional upset indicating a psychiatric consultation.
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