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Item type	Article
Authors	O'Connor, K; Thekiso, T; Douglas, L; Barry, H; Flynn, D; McCarthy, A; Swanwick, G
Publisher	Irish Medical Journal
Journal	Irish Medical Journal
Downloaded	13-Nov-2015 16:40:04
Link to item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/10147/288696">http://hdl.handle.net/10147/288696</a>

# 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, the UK and Australia 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 including Ireland, the UK and Australia psychiatry is one of these specialties<sup>1,2</sup>. In many countries year Basic Specialist Training places in psychiatry were filled in Ireland. The Trainee Committee is an elected body of the College of Psychiatry of Ireland (CPsychI) who provide representation for trainees in the College. Its broad remit is to promote greater involvement of trainees in College activities, and to contribute towards continued improvements in the standards of postgraduate psychiatric training in Ireland. One of the working groups of the Trainee Committee proposed and developed the summer school as a recruitment initiative. Similar initiatives such as The Institute of Psychiatry for Medical students in Toronto, The Claassen Institute in Western Australia and the summer school at the Institute of Psychiatry in London have been run with some success<sup>3,4</sup>. However, there are only two published reports worldwide<sup>5,6</sup> on the impact of a summer school like initiative on student attitudes and interest in a career in psychiatry. 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<sup>5,7</sup>.

## 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 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 one of six different psychiatric services. Site visits included an early intervention service, a drug and alcohol service, a neuropsychiatry department, a forensic service, a private psychiatric hospital and a research facility. At each site 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.

All seven Irish medical schools were requested to advertise the summer school to all their medical students (pre-clinical and clinical). Applications involved a written expression of interest. However due to the larger than expected response with 62 medical student applications received, it was decided to run the school twice i.e. on two consecutive days rather than on one day only as previously planned. No applications were received from University College Galway as this medical school was already on summer break at the time of advertising. No medical student was declined an opportunity to attend the summer school. In order to facilitate a comparison with previous studies we used a modified Nielson questionnaire. This questionnaire has been validated as a measure of the attitudes of medical students to psychiatry and has previously shown to be sensitive to change. Each question had four possible answers: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree, and was scored 1-4, respectively (Max score= 40, logical neutral point = 18).

Students were also asked to indicate their interest in psychiatry as a career and asked to outline the factors which encouraged and discouraged them from considering a career in psychiatry. Data relating to gender, age and marital status were also compiled.

At the summer school, students were invited to complete an additional one-page questionnaire designed to identify the factors influencing their career choice. Respondents were asked to rank the factors that influence their career choice. The factors presented were chosen based on a literature review. Data were analysed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) version 17. Fischer's test was used in the analyses of pre- and post-summer school questionnaire items and conventional t-tests to examine group differences.

## 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 Nielson 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 at 28.5 (SD +/- 3.1), ( $t= 2.10$ ,  $p< 0.05$ ). Three of the ten items on the modified Nielson 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<sup>8</sup> was ranked first, followed by a lifestyle,<sup>8</sup> personal reasons,<sup>8</sup> and aptitude in specialty.<sup>8</sup> Selection factors that were considered less important were influence from a mentor,<sup>8</sup> financial rewards,<sup>8</sup> and prestige<sup>8</sup>. A summary of these findings is shown in Table 3.

Fishers exact test

\* P <0.05

\*\*p<0.01

### 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%).

### 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 Nielson questionnaire. These attitudes were comparable to those found in previous studies in Israel and the USA<sup>9</sup>. Attendance at the summer school positively affected student's 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<sup>5</sup>. 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 Nielson questionnaire are worthy of comment. The number of students agreeing with the statement 'If a student is interested in Psychiatry as a career, other students or faculty will try to dissuade him or her' increased after completion of the summer school. A possible explanation is that attendance at the summer school increased students awareness of the negative opinions of some peers and senior colleagues, which may have only become explicit when they expressed their plan to attend the summer school. 64% of students prior to attendance at the summer school disagreed with the statement that '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 an assessment of their understanding of appropriate referral processes rather than an assessment of their attitudes to a family member attending a psychiatrist.

The reasons why medical students do and don't consider and chose a career in psychiatry are poorly understood study highlights a Personal interests<sup>8</sup> and a lifestyle<sup>8</sup> were the two most important factors for these students when selecting their specialty, while a financial rewards<sup>8</sup> and a prestige<sup>8</sup> were not highly rated. These results correlate with those of Gowans et al who found that those medical students who chose a psychiatric residency programme had an entry to medical school demonstrated attitudes of 'interest in the patient population', 'social orientation' and valuing work-life balance<sup>12</sup>.

The CPsychl plan to run the psychiatric summer school for medical students<sup>3</sup> again this summer. In response to student requests it will be longer and include more site visits<sup>13</sup>. 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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### **Acknowledgements**

P Scully, S McHale and each of the site visit locations staff and service users for all their time and support of the summer school, as well as E Kavanagh, J Gloster, CEager, G Smyth and M Silke for their invaluable administrative assistance.

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