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Navigating the Pathway in Specialty Selection and Medical Education Curricula

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Navigating the Pathway in Specialty Selection and Medical Education Curricula

Introduction

The San Joaquin Valley (SJV) faces significant health challenges, and many of its regions have been identified as “medically underserved areas.”¹ Research indicates that the long-standing shortage of health care professionals in rural areas is one of the factors that contribute to the poor health outcomes of the population.^{2,3} Furthermore, a recent report published by the University of California Office of the President (UCOP) emphasizes that there is a high need to improve health care access in the SJV.

The literature suggests that qualitative assessments of the resident perspectives of career preparation needs is limited, and that having qualitative data can have direct implications for the structuring of career preparation curricula during residency.⁴ Furthermore, previous research indicates that factors such as career planning, financial factors, lifestyle, and social and cultural aspects of a program that may influence the specialty choice and where an individual seeks to practice long-term.^{5,6} The literature has also documented that support programs such as mentorship programs can positively influence individuals’ specialty choice.⁷ This study hopes to provide data that can be used for structuring of career preparation curricula and identify the factors that residents considered when selecting a specialty.

Study Goals

1. Identify the factors that impact specialty selection of medical residents in the San Joaquin Valley.
2. Identify how residency programs and institutions of higher education can support the training of medical residents in the San Joaquin Valley.

Experimental Design

Research subjects:

- Eight medical residents training in the San Joaquin Valley

Inclusion Criteria:

- Medical residents training in the San Joaquin Valley

Exclusion Criteria:

- Individuals who are not medical residents in the San Joaquin Valley

Outcome measures:

- Experiences of medical residents in the San Joaquin Valley

This study utilized a semi-structured interview approach in which we asked medical residents to participate in a focus group with other residents to learn about their training experience in the San Joaquin Valley. Focus groups used open-ended prompts to allow for a free-flow discussion.

Residents were also individually interviewed about the factors they considered in selecting a specialty.

Prior to participation participants were provided a consent form. The interviews and focus groups were recorded, and recordings were transcribed to identify recurring themes and factors in specialty selection. Participants were given the option to have the conversation recorded or not.

The recordings and transcripts were assigned a code to further ensure confidentiality and were given the option to review the recording or transcript. In order to protect confidentiality, participants were assigned pseudonyms and other identifying characteristics were withheld.

Results

In our study “Navigating the Pathway in Specialty Selection and Medical Education Curricula” the following were themes and responses that were recurrently brought up by the eight study participants who represented the medical specialties of general surgery, emergency medicine, and internal medicine.

Social Cultural:

- When residents were asked what role does diversity play in choosing a training program?
- Overall residents viewed the presence of diversity (racial, educational, social, cultural) as very important. Diversity in patient population was deemed as the most important. One resident stated that “Going on the interview trail and looking at the different program this was the one question that I asked every program.”

Career Planning/Resources:

- When residents were asked “What career planning factors influence which specialty you wish to enter?”
 - Seven of the eight residents mentioned personal attributes and enjoyment of the specialty as their number one factor in specialty selection.
 - Responses had overlapping themes which can be summed up by “I pictured if I could be doing this forever and if I can have fun doing this forever.”
 - The second most common response was lifestyle which one resident rated as number one and half mentioned it as their number two most important factor.

- When residents were asked “What resources should be available to medical students from their medical school? What experiences should a medical school provide to a student other than educational?”
 - Resident consensus was that medical schools and residency training programs should provide financial, mental health, and mentorship resources outside of clinical training.
 - “So the first aspect is the Mental Health aspect, and currently (even in Medical School and residency) there is a big burnout rate. To help mitigate that, I believe that medical schools and residencies should have mental health programs available to students.”
 - The second aspect (financial planning), in medical school they did talk about limiting the amount of loans you take out, because it will accrue interest. Finally, in residency we had a talk about the various ways to pay off loans, loan forgiveness, and not just managing loans but also learning how to invest in residency if you have extra money, as well as planning for the future.”

Work Environment:

- When residents were asked “How important was your work environment when making your career decisions?”
 - Residents noted that their work environment was of utmost importance and was the largest determining factor when deciding on a choice of program.
 - One resident stated, “I just remembered being in some of the conferences and feeling like, “this sucks,” feeling degraded and beatdown. I want a place where I can feel free to learn and have good supervision, instruction, guidance, and even criticism---with the overarching theme of encouragement.”

Financial Factors:

- When residents were asked “How did debt and cost of living influence your decision to attend a particular program and the importance of loan forgiveness?”
 - Financially five out of the eight residents felt that their debt load and cost of living did influence their decision to attend a program.
 - One resident noted “The ability to live at home has saved me a large amount of money. I ranked my current program much higher than I would have otherwise.”
 - Residents who qualified for loan forgiveness stated that they would take advantage of this resource. “It will definitely influence where I choose to practice.

Conclusions

This study aimed to identify the factors that residents considered when selecting a specialty and provide data that can be used for structuring of career preparation curricula.

- All residents who were interviewed shared similar responses on the importance of personal attributes and satisfaction when entering a specialty.
- Mental health and financial planning were the two main requests made by participants. Several go into detail as how programs may have them but do not implement effectively.
- All residents noted that work environment was of utmost importance on deciding on a program. The word, “Malignant,” came up twice throughout the transcriptions. Addressing this concern can be beneficial for programs.
- All residents strongly valued diversity of population and training when selecting a program.
- Cost of living and loan forgiveness was important to most residents.

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