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The choice of ophthalmology as a career among Nigerian medical interns

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Summary

To determine the choice of ophthalmology as a career among Nigerian medical interns, structured questionnaire was administered to a set of medical interns at the University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital (UIITH), Ilorin, Kwara State in the year 2003. The key information sought included the University attended, duration of undergraduate ophthalmology posting, perception of ophthalmology as a specialty, and the choice of postgraduate specialty in order of preference. Also included were improvements they would like to see in the undergraduate teaching of ophthalmology and whether they support the view that interns should have mandatory clinical rotation in other surgical subspecialties like Ophthalmology and Otorhinolaryngology. Seventy-six interns who graduated from seven Nigerian medical schools participated in the study. Average duration of their undergraduate posting in Ophthalmology was 4 weeks. (SD=3.327). Fifty (67.6%) considered Ophthalmology as an interesting and important specialty, 6(8.1%) regarded it as a boring specialty, while 18(24.3%) considered it as just one specialty in their curriculum. Only 5 (6.6%) of the respondents chose Ophthalmology as first choice career while 16(21%), 14(18.4%), 13(17.1%) and 10(13.2%) chose Surgery, Paediatrics, Community Health and Obstetrics and Gynaecology respectively. 78% of the respondent suggested that interns should have clinical rotation in surgical subspecialties such as Ophthalmology. Other suggestions offered included the need to increase the duration of undergraduate Ophthalmology posting, provision of audiovisual aids and more equipment like Ophthalmoscope for teaching. The interns considered Ophthalmology posting as an important and interesting specialty even though only a few chose it as their future career. There is therefore an urgent need to improve the undergraduate teaching of Ophthalmology. The Medical and Dental Council of Nigeria (MDCN) should make rotation through Ophthalmology a part of the internship curriculum. These measures may increase the interest of medical students and interns alike in Ophthalmology as a career.

Keywords: *Career; choice; interns, ophthalmology*

Résumé

Pour déterminer le choix d'optamologie comme carrière parmi les corps medicale, un questionnaire-structure a tete administre aux medecine chef au Centre Universitaire hospitalier d'Ilorin, l'état de Kwara au Nigeria en 2003. Ceciuncli l'université atteint, le choix our un diplôme supericure dans

l'université atteint, le choix our un diplôme supericure dans l'ordre de préférence, la perception optamologique, la dure du poste d optamlogie comme specialite. Aussi le besion d une rotation dans les autres sub-specilaitees chirurgicales telque l'otorhinolyryngologie. Soixante-six medecins-chef de sept universites au Nigeria participaient a cette exerce. La duree de poste en optamologie etait de 4 seamines (3.32, SD), 67.6% considerait loptamologie comme une specialite interessante et importante, 8.1% le consiraient comme non-attriante alors que 24.3% optatent comme une matiere dans leur curriculum Seulement 6.6% des participants choists saientl optamologie comme premir choix dans leur carriere alorsque 21%, 18.4%, 17.1% et 13.3% choisissatent la chirurgie, la pediatric, la sante communautaire, l'obstetriqueet la gynecologie respectivement 78% preferaient une rotation dans les subpecilates et une augmentation de la duree de poste et l'approvisionnement des soins audiovisuels et equipement optamologique. Il est necessaire d'accrointre le taux des etudiants en optamologie et en sante dentaire et renforcer une rotation dans les sub-specilaitees comme part de leur, curriculum academique. Ce msesuures atigmenteraient l'interest des future medecins et eveillera l'optamologie comme une carriere.

Introduction

Studies on the choice of postgraduate specialty among medical students and interns alike have been widely reported [1-4]. Most of these publications established that the choicest specialties by medical students or interns are Surgery, Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Paediatrics, and Internal Medicine, while specialties like Psychiatry, Radiology, Pathology, Anesthesia and Ophthalmology were found to be less attractive

Nigeria with a population of about 125 million people has 250 registered ophthalmologists with an average of one ophthalmologist per 500,000 people (unpublished data from National Secretariat of Ophthalmological Society of Nigeria). In line with mal-distribution of Eye care specialists that exists in other developing countries, most of these Ophthalmic Specialists practice in cities while the bulk of the populace who live in semi-urban and rural areas lack access to quality eye care services. Consistent increase in the uptake of ophthalmology as a career of choice among Nigerian medical graduates will definitely increase the number of Ophthalmic specialists and invariably over a period of time, the scope of specialist eye care services will extend to secondary eye care centres that are located in semi-urban and rural areas.

Therefore, this study was carried out to determine the choice of ophthalmology as a career among Nigerian medical interns, the factors that influence such choice and how undergraduate ophthalmology training can improve in Nigeria.

Materials and methods

Structured questionnaire was administered on a set of medical interns at the University of Ilorin Teaching Hospital, Kwara State, Nigeria in the year 2003. The questionnaire was modified after that of Faponle [4] and information sought included the sex, age, University attended, duration of undergraduate ophthalmology posting and the interns perception of ophthalmology as a specialty. The respondents were also asked whether they had plans to undertake postgraduate medical (Residency) training and their individual choice of specialty if any, in order of preference. The questionnaire sought to know the improvement the interns would like to see in the teaching of ophthalmology at undergraduate level and whether they supported the view that interns should have mandatory clinical rotations in other surgical sub-specialties such as Ophthalmology and Otorhinolaryngology. Finally, the respondents were requested to state the factors that influenced their first choice of specialty. The data were analyzed electronically using Epi-info 6 statistical software package

Results

Sex, age and university attended

Seventy-six medical interns consisting of 58(76.3%) males and 18(23.7%) females participated in the study. The age of the respondents ranged from 23 to 34 years, with a mean of 26.8 years (SD±2.185) – Table 1. The interns graduated from 7 Universities in Nigeria, 60 (78.9%) being products of the University of Ilorin – Table 2.

Table 1: Age groups of the Interns

Age group	Freq	%
<25	07	9.2%
25-30	64	84.2%
>30	05	6.6%
Total	76	100%

Table 2: University attended

University	Freq	%
University of Ilorin, Ilorin	60	78.95
University of Ibadan, Ibadan	07	9.21
Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria	03	3.94
Obafemi Awolowo University, Ife	03	3.94
University of Nigeria Nsukka	01	3.94
Uthmandanfodio University, Sokoto	01	1.32
Ladoke Akintola University of Technology Ogbomosho	01	1.32
Total	76	100%

The interns had spent an average of 3 months of the statutory 12 months at the time the study was conducted. The duration of the respondents' undergraduate posting in Ophthalmology varied from two to eight weeks with an average of 4 weeks.

Interns impression on Ophthalmology as a specialty

Fifty (67.6%) of the interns considered ophthalmology as an interesting and important specialty, 6(8.1%) regarded it as a boring specialty while 18(24.3%) viewed it as just one specialty in their curriculum. No one indicated that he/she did not have an idea of what ophthalmology is about.

Suggested improvement in the teaching of Ophthalmology

Seventeen (22.4%) of the interns suggested an extension of the period allocated for undergraduate ophthalmology posting while 54 (71%) clamoured for improvement in the teaching especially with the use of Teaching Aids such as models and audio visual aids. Other suggestions include the need to lay more emphasis on acquisition of basic ophthalmic diagnostic skills such as ophthalmoscopy and provision of closed-circuit television system in the operating theatre for better understanding and visualization of surgical procedures in ophthalmology.

View of Interns in clinical rotations through surgical subspecialties.

Fifty-nine (77.6%) of the respondents supported the idea that interns should be allowed to rotate through other surgical subspecialties such as Otorhinolaryngology and Ophthalmology during their internship so as to broaden their clinical experience in those disciplines. The remaining 17(22.4%) had a contrary opinion, stating that such measure might prolong the duration of internship beyond the present statutory one year.

Table 3: First choice specialty of the Interns

Specialty	No. of Interns	%
Surgery	16	21.05
Paediatrics	14	18.42
Community Health	13	17.11
Obstetrics and Gynaecology	10	13.16
Ophthalmology	5	6.58
Radiology	4	5.26
Pathology	4	5.26
Medicine	2	2.63
Anesthesia	2	2.63
General Medical Practice	1	1.32
Psychiatry	3	3.95
Otorhinolaryngology	2	2.63
Total	76	100%

Factors that influence the choice of specialty

Forty-three (53.6%) of the respondents attributed the preference for their first choice specialty to personal interest in those disciplines while 11 (14.5%) based their choice on perceived work load which would allow more room for extra-curricular activities and family matters. Relevance to the society, self fulfillment and the expected financial reward accounted for the choice of 7.9%, 3.9% and 2% of the respondents. Other factors (5%) given included "prestige attached to the specialty" and God's guidance while 10.1% of the respondents did not indicate the factor that influenced their first choice of career.

Discussion

The outcome of this study may be a perception of the value of undergraduate ophthalmology training in Nigerian Medical Schools. Even though 50(67.6%) of the respondents considered Ophthalmology as an important and interesting specialty, only 6(6.6%) chose it as their first choice career.

The relatively low disposition of interns to ophthalmology as a career could be explained by the short duration of undergraduate posting which limits the clinical exposure of the students. It is stated that the exposure of students to even a small part of the practical work of a subspecialty encourages positive attitudes in the graduates [5]. It is not surprising that the interns would want the medical students to acquire basic skills in ophthalmology such as ophthalmoscopy during their posting. For instance, in tertiary health institutions, ophthalmology residents are often called upon by their colleagues in other clinical disciplines to carry out routine funduscopy on their patients.

The low preference for ophthalmology may also be related to a poor understanding of the specialty as suggested by request for improvement in the teaching of ophthalmology with the use of appropriate Teaching Aids. It has been emphasized that the primary factor that influences the career choices of medical students is the quality of medical school education. This involves the experiences in the medical schools especially as regards students perception of the dedication of teachers and how practical and inspiring the teaching was [6,7].

There has also been a widespread belief among University teachers that there is a positive correlation between good teaching ability and research activity. However, numerous studies have failed to establish the nature of the relationship or whether there is one at all. Thus, the best Clinician or the best Researcher may not necessarily be the best Teacher [8, 9].

The need for interns to have clinical rotation in

other surgical subspecialties is also important, as it will increase their clinical experience. Such clinical rotation through ophthalmology will not only increase the competence of medical graduates in managing simple eye disorders and carrying out appropriate referrals when necessary, but it will also arouse their interest in such specialty for future career.

In conclusion, we recommend a revision of the Medical curriculum in Nigerian Universities with a view to increasing the period of exposure to a subspecialty like ophthalmology. Undergraduate teaching of ophthalmology should also be backed up by the provision of appropriate Teaching Aids. Finally, the Nigerian Medical and Dental Council should include clinical rotations in other surgical subspecialties such as ophthalmology and Otorhinolaryngology as part of the surgical rotation during internship in all training institutions. The above measures will increase the understanding, clinical experience and probably the interest of medical students and interns alike in choosing ophthalmology as a career.

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