

Short Report:

Abstract:

Near-peer learning at undergraduate level¹ has the potential to introduce students to a career in general practice. A recommendation from The Wass report which suggested the need to provide enthusiastic role models within general practice was the stimulus for the introduction of a near-peer GP mentoring scheme at UCL Medical School².

The UCL Medical School GP mentoring scheme was introduced in the academic year of 2019 enlisting UCL GP training scheme doctors to pair up with UCL Medical Students in order to meet face-to-face and discuss a career in general practice. Following the end of the scheme, a mixture of focus groups and semi-structured interviews were utilised to provide an insight into the students' experiences of the mentoring scheme.

This project focused on the perceptions, experiences and insights of the medical students that participated in the GP near-peer mentoring scheme and considered their views about a career within general practice. The project also considered the students' perceptions of their trainee as a role-model figure.

Context:

With GP recruitment numbers have been falling over the past decade³, it is important to consider the role played by medical schools in adequately informing medical students about general practice as a career. As outlined in the Wass report², medical schools can provide role models within general practice and provide early insights into general practice careers. These recommendations informed the introduction of a near-peer GP mentoring scheme at UCL Medical School (UCLMS).

Project aims:

This project aimed to focus on medical students' experiences of having a near-peer mentor. We considered how this compared to other educator figures that the students had exposure to within their clinical GP placements. We sought to focus on students' associated perceptions of professional identity and role modelling. We considered whether being mentored impacted students' perception of general practice as a future speciality.

Description:

In the 2019 academic year, 25 GP trainee volunteers were paired with UCL Medical Students of all year groups. Medical students were encouraged to participate if they had a prior interest in general practice as well as if it was a career, which they had no particular interest in. GP trainees (mentors) received a briefing prior to participation (figure 1). Mentees (medical students) contacted randomly allocated mentors (GP trainees) to arrange a meeting to discuss general practice careers. Refreshments during meetings between GP trainee and student were subsidised with a £20 voucher per pair.

At the end of the academic year, mentees were invited to participate in a focus group and semi-structured interviews. Participants received a £20 gift card and refreshments during the interview. 7 students participated in total (Figure 2).

PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

Ethics approval was sought from the UCL research and ethics committee. A focus group and two semi-structured interviews were conducted by the same researcher (AG) due to the availability of the students. A pre-written introduction was read out to the students beforehand (Figure 3), interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by an independent transcription company. Transcriptions were anonymised and reviewed for accuracy.

PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 3 HERE

Thematic categories were developed inductively from the data⁴. The data was then analysed using these categories (Figure 5) and the emergent findings were considered with the supervisor (AS).

PLEASE INSERT FIGURE 5 HERE

Outcomes:

Four key themes were identified during thematic analysis, which will be presented with indicative quotations:

Mentor Relatability:

Mentees felt that they were able to see themselves in their mentors and identified the similarities that they shared with mentors. Many suggested that it was because the mentor was relatively young, having recently experienced similar challenges to them.

'...hearing that from someone who actually was going through that and now is like at the end of the GP training pathway it felt like well actually this guy is just kind of like me...'

Mentor professionalism and attitude:

The mentees identified the mentors' enthusiasm and eagerness to answer their questions and to assist and advise them on future career pathways.

Mentors were described as *'approachable, patient and inspiring'*.

One mentee described how the mentor put her at ease and was very approachable. Mentees felt able to ask personal questions to the mentors and were invited to do so.

'At no point did I feel like I was taking up too much of his time, it was very good'
'She was willing to like tell me pretty much everything, she was very open'

Mentees felt that their mentors (GP trainees) showed the same level of professionalism as fully qualified GPs.

'If I didn't know he was an ST3, he would have looked like a GP to me'

The gender of the mentor was not felt to be a factor in impacting rapport.

Mentee perception of GP mentors compared to GP tutors on clinical placements:

Mentees commented that they felt less able to have the same discussions with GP tutors as they were able to hold with their mentor. They also felt that there was often insufficient time to discuss careers with GP tutors.

'GPs in clinical placement don't really have the time to sit down and talk about these things'

'GP placement is mostly focussed on the actual clinical side, so like seeing patients and discussing the cases, but there's not an opportunity really to like speak about the training programmes and the options that are available'.

Pre-conceptions of general practice and perceptions of general practice after near-peer GP mentoring:

There was a marked change in mentees' perception of general practice before and after participating in the near-peer GP mentoring scheme. Students perceived that general practice was a career choice for doctors that had been unsuccessful in their pursuit of other specialities and managing uninteresting clinical cases. Mentees described feeling that GPs were often overworked and burnt out.

One mentee stated that he had *'always heard about general practice as one of those back up careers'*.

Nevertheless, having spoken to mentors, the positive aspects that mentees described included the diversity in GP roles available. Mentees commented on GPs having greater autonomy in their working structures and being able to maintain a good work-life balance. Mentees also described General Practice as a front-line service hence, they would see patients with conditions first-hand without knowing what cases to expect that day thereby adding a problem-solving element to the role.

'I'd heard of the idea of being a GP with a special interest. So I understand after you become a GP there's other like training courses you go on and you can do diplomas'.

Conclusions:

Whilst limitations to this study include the self-selecting nature of the participants as well as the small sample size, it is clear that mentors are perceived as key role model figures and ambassadors of general practice alongside GP tutors. This project adds to the body of literature suggesting that near-peer mentoring provides mutual benefits to participants. Whilst larger scale projects are needed, GP trainees are perhaps an underutilised resource when considering the impact that they can have in representing general practice and demonstrating its strengths as a career choice.

References:

1. McDonald P, Jackson B, Alberti H, Rosenthal J. How can medical schools encourage students to choose general practice as a career? *British Journal of General Practice* , 66 (647) pp 292-293 (2016). 2016.
2. Wass V, Simon G, Katie P-S. By choice - not by chance. Supporting medical students towards future careers in general practice. Health Education England; November 2016.
3. Limb M. Still no "credible plan" to increase GP numbers, say MPs. *BMJ*. 2017;357.
4. Braun V, Clarke V. Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*. 2006;3(2):77-101.