

What are the Career Plans of GP Trainees and Newly Qualified General Practitioners in the UK? A National Online Survey

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Abstract

Aim: To conduct a national survey for the First5 GPs and GP trainees to see what their future career plans are, and their views on the current issues in general practice, on a background of significant workforce problems in general practice.

Method: Survey monkey was used to create an online survey that was distributed with the help of RCGP in their AiT bulletin and through their social media accounts. The links were also posted on several GP Facebook groups, Twitter and LinkedIn accounts. The survey ran between 5th of October and the 31st of October 2015.

Results: 322 and 249 responses were received from First5 GPs and GP trainees respectively, just over 60% of First5 GPs and 68% of GP trainees are either definitely or possibly considering a move abroad where they feel there is a better outlook for general practice. The most popular destinations were Australia, Canada and New Zealand, a significant proportion are not considering a return to the UK. The main reasons given for early retirement were workload, job related stress, current government health care policies, working long hours, administrative work, high patient demand and risk of litigation. A majority of First5 GPs and GP trainees do not feel 7 day access to general practice is a good idea, they think the future of general practice in the UK is looking bleak and that the NHS is heading towards privatization, which the majority are against. Only about 18% of trainees would still apply for GPVTS even if 7 day GP access working was in place, 34% would consider other careers and 47% would not recommend general practice to juniors.

Conclusion: Government policies, patient demands, unsustainable workload and low morale are contributing to GP trainees and newly qualified GPs in significant numbers thinking about leaving the UK general practice permanently, and changing career or retiring early. They are also less likely to recommend a career in general practice. There may need to be an urgent review of the strategies currently being considered to mitigate the workforce difficulties in general practice.

Article Summary

Strength and limitations of this study

1. A feature of this survey was the relative simplicity and time required to complete
2. Responses received from different parts of the UK.
3. Not able to define definitively a response rate and representativeness due to governance issues constraining direct approaches.
4. This strategy also compromised the ability to obtain a contextual sense to responses and an opportunity for detailed statistical analysis.
5. The survey was undertaken at a time when 7 day access to general practice and the possible imposition of a new contract for junior doctors, on less favorable terms were high on the news agenda.

Introduction

General practice in the United Kingdom is currently at a critical juncture. An increasingly ageing population and growing levels of multi-morbidity have contributed to a growing demand on services [1,2]. Meeting this demand has been particularly challenging in light of financial pressures facing the health and social care systems [3]. In order to address with this mismatch, there have been a number of new models of service delivery that are either being developed or tested including federations, super-partnerships and primary and acute care systems (PACS) [4].

However, the success of these new models and indeed the very future of general practice as a discipline is being threatened by a workforce that is shrinking so rapidly that it has been declared as being at "crisis point" [5].

Fewer doctors are choosing to apply to general practice specialty training posts [6] and there are increasing numbers of established general practitioners choosing to work part-time and retire early. With current health policy that is dictating 7 day access to GPs this workforce shortage is set to grow in the near future [7].

In a recent national policy paper, a number of incentives have been suggested to improve recruitment to general practice, help retain doctors within the profession and support those who wish to return after a career break [8].

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In order to optimise workforce strategies and understand potential future challenges, there is a need to understand the views of current trainee and newly qualified general practitioners. In this study, we used a national survey to seek the perspectives of these professionals about their future career plans.

Aim

The aim of this project was to conduct a national survey for the First5 GPs and GP trainees to see what their future career plans are and their views on the current issues over general practice.

Method

The main focus of this survey was on GPs within 5 years of first independent practice (First5) and GP trainees an online survey tool was used through Survey Monkey. The questions were piloted on several trainees and newly qualified GPs leading to refinements. The survey was distributed with the help of RCGP in their AiT bulletin and through their social media accounts (including Facebook and Twitter).

The links were also posted on several GP Facebook groups and via Twitter and LinkedIn accounts to augment circulation. The survey was initiated on the 5th of October and closed on the 31st of October 2015. Survey Monkey was used to analyse the results and Microsoft Excel was used to create tables and bar charts.

Analysis

For the First5 GP survey we received 322 responses from which 234 were females and 87 were males with 1 skipping the question. The majority (57%) of the respondents were between 30-34 years of age. For the GP trainees survey we received 249 responses, 182 were females and 67 were males. The responses were from GP trainees attached to deaneries across the UK with the proportion of responses ranging from 1.63% (South West – Severn), to 14.29% (London), in England and about 5% from Wales, just under 6% from Scotland and 1.63% from Northern Ireland. For the First5 GPs there were responses from across the UK where nearly 18% were from London. The majority of trainees were between 25-34 years of age and just over 74% went into GP training straight after completing their foundation training FY2 job and some had changed from surgical/medical training or were in locum positions.

We asked the First5 GPs why they chose GP as a career and why the trainees chose GP training (Figure 1). The most popular reason for choosing GP as a career in both surveys was work life balance, continuity of care, patient contact and remarkable variety of general practice. Examples of some of the comments made by the First5 GPs and trainees were; 'training in one place, not being shifted around a deanery – so wifey and I could live together', 'the chance to be my own boss and run my own business', 'ability to tailor career (portfolio GP)', 'it seemed to be the only option if I wanted to have children', 'I like getting to know families and seeing people through their years, a descent GP makes a massive difference', 'ability to become a partner and have a much greater control over how medical services are provided i.e. have the power to do it properly', 'Being 'my doctor' rather than 'the doctor', 'to act as a patient advocate for minorities and the poor', 'and opportunity for health promotion and patient education'.

The results showed that 53.87% First5 GPs are working as salaried GPs, 26.13% as partners, 28.71% are working as locums some in addition to their regular salaried/partnership job, and 8.71% are working in out of hours settings, 56.69% are working 4-7 sessions and 37.90% work more than 8 sessions per week. We asked the trainees what their work

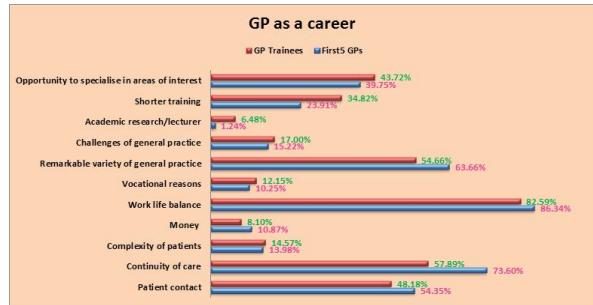


Figure 1: Why general practice was chosen as a career.

plans were once they qualified as GPs, 58.40% of the trainees intended to work in salaried positions, and 21.85% were planning to look for a partnership, with 44.12% looking to locum alongside their regular job as salaried or partnership, and 19.33% want to have portfolio career.

With the current British governments' health policies and working conditions in the UK we asked about intentions to move and work abroad and prospect of a return to the UK. Just over 36% of first5 GPs are considering going abroad 30.61% are not considering returning to the UK with 40.31% not sure if they would come back to UK as they feel there is a better outlook abroad (Table 1), 23% are unsure about whether they would leave the UK. For GP trainees over 35% are considering working abroad, with 32.38% saying maybe. Only about 16.36% are likely to return to the UK with 46.67% not sure if they would return. The countries of choice overseas in both the surveys are Canada, Australia and New Zealand including those who are already working abroad other areas of interest is the Middle East and Europe and Germany in particular. The most commonly cited reasons given for moving abroad were the current government health policies and interference, patient demands, unsustainable workload, lack of respect, low morale, doctors being undervalued in UK, no prospects in GP, overregulation, more pressure at work, conditions are worsening and difficult to maintain work life balance. Some are willing to return if conditions improve, if government and public are able to demonstrate respect and value for the profession.

We also asked about intentions to leave general practice, (Figure 2) shows some of the main reasons for leaving general practice before retirement age. There were some interesting comments made by the respondents and these parallel the themes described earlier and are summed up by; 'not getting paid fairly and lack of willingness from government to work with those seeing the patients in healthcare, injustice of the system, being made to work/cover 8-8pm 7 days/week, 99% of my choice to leave would be based on political disruption to the NHS and politician pulling the wool over the public eyes'.

We asked First5 GPs and GP trainees their views on the future of general practice and to rate the propositions from 1-5 with 1 indicating strong disagreement and 5 indicating strong agreement (Table 2). Just over 73% First5 GPs and 60 % of GP trainees strongly disagree that the changes recommended by the government for 7 day GP access is a good idea. Respondents commented that GPs already provide OOH service, working 7 days will tire everyone out, will stretch an already overburdened service, patient demand is already high by offering a 7 day routine service it means making general practice more like a consumer service and demands will continue to increase, not enough GPs Mon-Fri already, increasing it over weekend will make this worse, unachievable, unsafe, it is deliberately designed to damage

		Yes	No	Maybe	N/A
First5 GP	Are you considering working abroad?	36.98%	36.66%	23.79%	2.57%
	If yes to the above question, are you likely to return back to UK?	17.35%	30.61%	40.31%	11.73%
GP trainees	Are you considering working abroad once you have completed your training?	35.66%	28.28%	32.38%	3.69%
	If yes to the above question, are you likely to return back to UK?	16.36%	28.48%	46.67%	8.48%

Table 1: Working abroad?

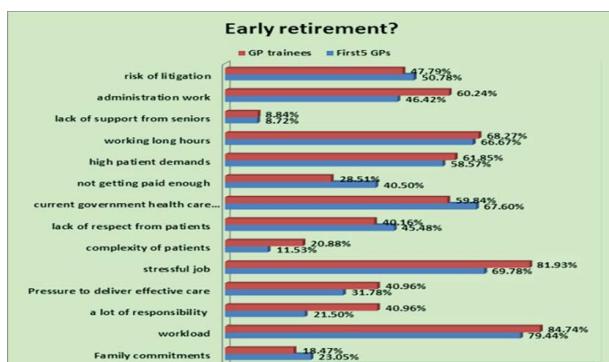


Figure 2: Reasons given by First5 GPs and GP trainees for early retirement

morale and remove safe working practices in order to damage the NHS, routine care at the weekend not widely wanted or needed and totally unrealistic presently with the crisis in recruitment. Some felt it would be good idea if appropriately funded, with more staff and resources.

64.42% of First5 GPs and over 50% GP trainees strongly disagree that the future of general practice is looking bright. GPs are really concerned about the future of general practice, which they feel is bleak, due to a crisis in recruitment, a difficulty in retaining GPs, an increasing workload, increasing patient demands, increasing complexity of patients, and a decreasing number of GPs to meet demands. One respondent felt the future in UK will not look bright until pay and working conditions are matched to New Zealand and Canada.

Over 79% First5 GPs and 76% of GP trainees have rated 4 (agree) and 5 (strongly agree) that general practice/NHS is heading towards privatization. Most respondents feel that it is what the government is aiming for and their goal is for private healthcare, some feel that unless massive changes happen it is looking inevitable, with the NHS in its final years. Over 50% First5 GPs strongly disagree with privatization with 16.67% unsure (rating 3) and over 73% GP trainees disagree or strongly disagree with privatization. Respondents feel that we have a healthcare system that is the envy of the world, we provide access for everyone regardless of income, and if we lose this we let down the most vulnerable people in our society. Some feel that the current model is unsustainable so something will have to change. Others feel doctors will be financially better off and would benefit from improved work life balance but patients will suffer, it will lead to cherry picking by private companies and poor patient care and the private companies will have profits at their center not patient care.

A lot of the trainees when asked if they would have still applied for

		1	2	3	4	5
Do you think the changes Recommended by the government for 7 day working for GP is a good idea?	First5 GPS	73.44%	14.43%	4.92%	3.61%	3.61%
	GP trainees	60.85%	21.70%	9.36%	5.53%	2.55%
Do you think the future of general practice is looking bright?	First5 GPS	64.42%	22.76%	9.94%	1.60%	1.28%
	GP trainees	55.37%	30.17%	10.74%	1.65%	2.07%
Do you think general practice/NHS is heading towards privatisation?	First5 GPS	3.76%	4.08%	12.54%	31.03%	48.59%
	GP trainees	4.88%	4.88%	14.23%	34.15%	41.87%
Are you for privatisation?	First5 GPS	58.65%	15.38%	16.67%	3.21%	6.09%
	GP trainees	56.50%	17.07%	18.70%	1.63%	6.10%

Table 2: Views of First5 GPs and GP trainees regarding future of general practice (rating 1 indicates strongly against and 5 indicates strongly agree).

GPVTS if the 7 day GP access policy was in place by the government said they wouldn't (39.11%) with 41.94% not sure (Figure 3). Only about 18% said they would still apply for GP training if 7 day GP access was put in place by the government.

We wanted to know what the current GPs think about career as a doctor/GP (Table 3). Just over 41% would not become a doctor if they had a chance to go back; most stated they would become engineer, lawyer, dentist, vet, teacher, banker, pilot, finance, accountancy, shop keeper, Pizza shop owner, wedding planner etc. Just over 34% would consider doing other specialties instead of GP (the most popular ones were psychiatry, palliative medicine, dermatology, pediatrics, an aesthetics, radiology and ophthalmology), 20.63% stated maybe. 47.17% stated they would not recommend general practice to juniors mainly because of the issues that have been mentioned above, with 21.70% stating maybe. Few felt that it is a fantastic job and they didn't think any other specialties were much better, if someone was keen they would not discourage them but would give them a clear picture of what would be involved.

Discussion

This survey highlights a number of key elements that are likely to influence GP trainees and newly qualified GPs when they consider their future career plans and consequently contribute to the workforce difficulties facing general practice. The magnitude of these difficulties appears serious with 60% of First5 respondents and 68% of GP trainees considering a move abroad, with a significant proportion unsure about whether they would return to the UK. Of concern also is that just over 40% of respondents would reconsider their career choice of medicine, and more disconcerting for general practice is that about 80% would either not recommend a career in general practice or consider a career in a different specialty if given the opportunity to choose again. In

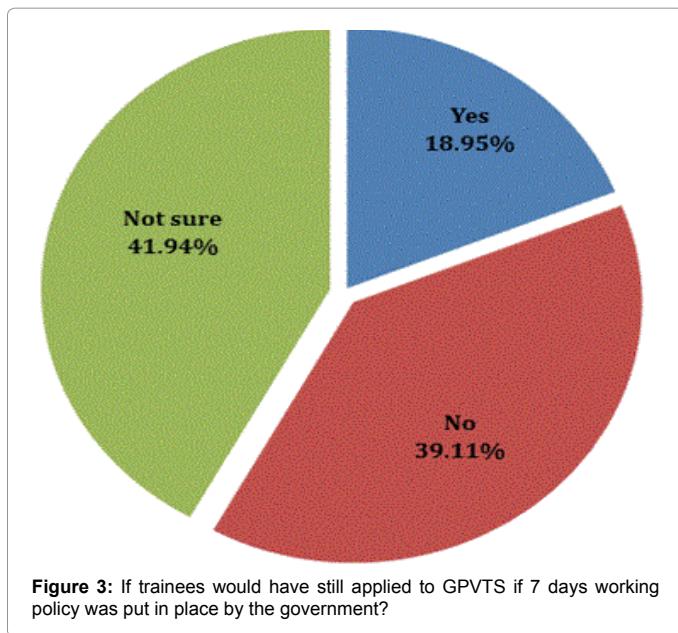


Figure 3: If trainees would have still applied to GPVTS if 7 days working policy was put in place by the government?

	Yes	No	Maybe
If you had chance to go back would you still become a doctor?	32.90%	41.61%	25.48%
If you had chance to go back would you consider doing other speciality?	34.06%	45.31%	20.63%
Would you recommend career in general practice to juniors?	31.13%	47.17%	21.70%

Table 3: Career as doctor/GP

addition there is a desire to retire early and leading factors here are similar to those noted in other studies [9] and include; workload and work related stress, health policy – particularly 7 day access to general practice, high patient expectation and worries about litigation.

A feature of this survey is the relative simplicity and time required to complete it, and that the responses receive dare from different parts of UK, although a high proportion are from London. However we are not able to define definitively a response rate and representativeness due to governance issues constraining direct approaches. This strategy also compromised the ability to obtain a contextual sense to responses and an opportunity for detailed statistical analysis. The survey was undertaken at a time when 7 day access to general practice and the possible imposition of a new contract for junior doctors, on less favorable terms were high on the news agenda.

The themes highlighted as contributing to the primary reasons for wanting to leave UK general practice early or completely, very much align with work from other recent studies [9], what we think our survey accentuates are the numbers of GPs prepared to consider uprooting and settling abroad, with 86% of First5 and 85% of GP trainee respondents hold a fairly disconsolate view regarding the future of general practice in the UK, with many fearing an inexorable move to privatization of the NHS.

Notwithstanding the brief nature of the questionnaire, there is some dissonance [9] between the measures being considered to

ameliorate the effect on recruitment and retention of the GP workforce and the deep-seated concerns noted here. There may be a regionally specificities, however these may just be nuance [9], a more detailed inventory may allow a more quantitative analysis, and this should have a clearer focus on obviating factors, which may include a clearer and possibly narrower definition of General Practice. Consideration should be given to a more evidence based healthcare policy, with more overt conversations on rationing and priority-setting in the context of demographic and financial imperatives.

Conclusion

To conclude the survey results have shown that just over 60% of First5 GPs and 68% of GP trainees are either definitely or possibly considering a move abroad where they feel there is a better outlook for general practice. The most popular destinations were Australia, Canada and New Zealand, a significant proportion are not considering a return to the UK. Government policies, patient demands, unsustainable workload and low morale are contributing to GP trainees and newly qualified GPs in significant numbers thinking about leaving the UK general practice permanently (just over 60% of First5 GPs and 68% of GP trainees). The main reasons given for early retirement were workload, job related stress, current government health care policies, working long hours, administrative work, high patient demand and risk of litigation. A majority of First5 GPs and GP trainees do not feel 7 day access to general practice is a good idea, they think the future of general practice in the UK is looking bleak and that the NHS is heading towards privatization, which the majorities are against. Only about 18% of trainees would still apply for GPVTS even if 7 day GP access working was in place, 34% would consider other careers and 47% would not recommend general practice to juniors. There may need to be an urgent review of the strategies currently being considered to mitigate the workforce difficulties in general practice.

Contributors

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Competing Interests

None declared.

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