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RESEARCH LETTER

Students' and general practitioners' perceptions of a recently introduced clerkship in general practice. A survey from Austria

MARTIN SPRENGER¹, JULIA BAUMGARTNER², ADRIAN MOSER³,
HELMUT J. F. SALZER⁴, FLORIAN L. STIGLER⁵ & MICHAEL WENDLER⁶

¹Medical University of Graz, Universitätsplatz 3/4, 8010 Graz, Austria, ²Head of Association of Young General Practitioners of Austria, Graz, Austria, ³GP trainee, Graz, Austria, ⁴Unit of Infectious Disease, Division of Pulmonology, Department of Internal Medicine, Medical University of Graz, Austria, ⁵International Federation of Medical Students' Associations (IFSMA), Graz, Austria, ⁶Head of a teaching practice, Graz, Austria

Abstract

Background: In autumn 2007, the Medical University of Graz (MUG) upgraded the status of general practice in medical training by integrating a compulsory five-week clerkship in general practice surgeries in the sixth and last year of the curriculum. In cooperation with the Styrian Academy of General Practice (STAFAM), more than 200 general practitioners (GPs) had been accredited to introduce medical students to the specific tasks, problems and decision-making process in general practice. Between October 2007 and June 2009, more than 300 students completed the clerkship. **Objective:** To explore the perceptions of students and GPs towards this new approach to undergraduate teaching in Austrian general practice. **Methods:** Between March and June 2009, we conducted a cross-sectional survey by using a self-administered questionnaire with 14 items for students as well as GPs. To limit recall bias, we gave the questionnaire to all students ($n = 146$) and GPs ($n = 146$) immediately after the clerkship. The response rates were 146/146 (100%) and 114/146 (78%) for students and GPs, respectively. **Results:** The study results show high satisfaction rates among students as well as GPs. Most of the students and GPs perceive the compulsory clerkship in general practice as an essential part of medical education. The organization of the clerkship had the least positive outcome.

Conclusion: Our survey shows that the clerkship is well accepted among Austrian medical students and GPs.

Key words: Cross-sectional survey, undergraduate training, general practice, clerkship, attitudes

Introduction

The Medical University of Graz (MUG), Austria, started reforming its curriculum in 2002–2003. In autumn 2007, the status of general practice in medical training was upgraded by integrating a compulsory five-week clerkship in general practice surgeries in the sixth and last year of the curriculum. Between October 2007 and June 2009, more than 300 students completed the clerkship. Prior to this time, only a few interested students found their way into a primary care setting.

In cooperation with the Styrian Academy of General Practice (STAFAM), more than 200 general practitioners (GPs) have been accredited to introduce medical students to the specific tasks, problems

and decision-making process in general practice. To be accredited, practices have to be contracted with the Austrian Health Insurance, GPs must have worked more than five years independently, oversee more than 500 heterogeneous patients per quarter, do regularly home visits and work at least 30 h per week. GPs receive €30 per day for supervising a student. A guideline is provided to help with organizational and didactical issues.

Studies from other countries have shown potential benefits of undergraduate teaching taking place within the community (1,2). For the first time, all students at the MUG have the opportunity to get an insight into the world of general practice. The students are involved in decision-making processes in a none-selected patient

load. Active learning in a 1:1 teaching environment should help students to deepen their diagnostic and therapeutic skills while dealing with chronic diseases, minor illnesses, inverse problems, or caring for elderly, multimorbid, and palliative patients (3,4). Besides improving their medical skills, students can also practice communication and negotiation, as well as other aspects of biopsychosocial medicine (5).

A half-day seminar prepares the students for the clerkship. During the five-week clerkship, all students are an integral, full time working part of their teaching practice. They have to keep a log to document their daily experiences, knowledge gained and skill development. Additionally, the students have to provide three case reports. For both tasks, the students receive special descriptions and formats. Five hours per week have to be spent on tutorials where specific questions can be asked and cases discussed. At the end of the clerkship, two succeeding half-day seminars are held at the university to share experiences and present logbooks and case reports.

Knowing that undergraduate teaching in general practice might be a 'double edged sword' for doctors as well as students (6), we wanted to learn more about the satisfaction of medical students and GPs with the new clerkship and their perception of methodological, didactical and organizational issues.

Methods

Between March and June 2009, we conducted a cross-sectional survey using a self-administered questionnaire consisting of 14 five-point Likert items (1 = agree strongly, 5 = disagree strongly) assessing satisfaction, methodology, didactics and organization. We invited all students ($n = 146$) and all teaching practices (GPs, $n = 146$) in this semester to participate in the survey. To limit recall bias, we gave the questionnaire to all students and GPs immediately after the clerkship. All answers have been treated and analysed anonymously.

Results

Students

All 146 students (58% females) completed the questionnaire. All of them were in their sixth and last year of the curriculum. Most of the students (78%) were between 20 and 25 years old, the rest were between 26 and 30 years old.

Overall satisfaction. 127 students (87%) strongly agreed and 19 (13%) agreed that the clerkship was overall a positive experience. 119 students (81%) strongly agreed and 21 (14%) agreed that the proposed

content of teaching came across. Only six students (4%) were ambivalent to this question. Nearly all (89%) strongly agreed that the compulsory clerkship in general practice was an essential part of their personal medical education and that the clerkship fitted perfectly into the clinical year.

Methodology and didactics. 117 students (79%) strongly agreed that the supervision during the clerkship was ideal, and 120 students (82%) strongly agreed that the expertise of the tutor was excellent and that the tutor responded to their questions and problems. The remainder of students agreed to these questions. Most of the students (86%) strongly agreed that there was enough time to fulfil their tasks.

Organization. 115 students (79%) strongly agreed or agreed that the duration of the clerkship was sufficient; 12 students (8%) would have liked it to be longer. Only two thirds (68%) strongly agreed that the administration by the university was satisfactory.

General practitioners

The questionnaire was completed and returned by 114/146 (78%) of the teaching practices (26% females). Most GPs (94%) were older than 45 years of age.

Overall satisfaction. 100 GPs (87%) strongly agreed and 14 (13%) agreed that mentoring a student was a positive experience. Not as many (79%) strongly agreed that they were able to convey the intended content of the clerkship. 21 GPs (18%) just agreed to that question. Almost all GPs (97%) strongly agreed that the compulsory clerkship in general practice is an essential part of medical education.

Methodology and didactics. Half of the GPs (53%) strongly agreed and 39% agreed that there was enough time for tutorials. 84 GPs (73%) strongly agreed and 23 (22%) agreed that their student was well prepared for the clerkship. 89% of GPs strongly agreed that the student accepted their advice and suggestions. Just half of the GPs (53%) strongly agreed that the guidelines provided for the clerkship were helpful; 30% just agreed to that question.

Organization. Only one third of the responding GPs (38%) strongly agreed that the duration of the clerkship was sufficient, 25% agreed and one third (31%) neither agreed nor disagreed. 72% strongly agreed and 21% agreed that the administration by the university was satisfactory.

Discussion

Our survey showed a high degree of overall satisfaction with the clerkship among students and GPs. Most of them think that this clerkship is an essential

part of medical education. Although the assessment of methodology and didactics was very positive, there is still space to improve the quality. Only half of the GPs strongly agreed that they had enough time for tutorials. The organization of the clerkship had the least positive outcome. The duration of the clerkship is another point for discussion: only two thirds of the students and one third of the GPs strongly agreed that the duration of the clerkship was long enough.

Strengths and limitations

In many countries, teaching in community general practice is a challenging but attractive strategy to meet the increasing need for medical education (7). However, to the best of our knowledge, our survey is the first Austrian study looking at the perceptions of students and GPs towards this approach to undergraduate teaching. Early patient contact in primary care is highly appreciated by the students, and GPs assess the clerkship as meaningful and necessary. The answers to our self-administered questionnaire might have been biased towards positive results. Furthermore, since 22% of the GPs did not return the questionnaire, some selection bias in the GPs' answers might have occurred.

Others have shown that practices involved in undergraduate medical education have a better performance on quality indicators (8). Personal feedback of GPs suggest that acting as tutors had a positive effect on their job satisfaction, motivation, the practice team and even their patients. However, these effects should be studied in more detail. Our survey was limited to the exploration of perceptions and did neither assess what students learned nor assess the quality of teaching. Therefore, an assessment of diagnostic, therapeutic and administrative skills will be conducted in the near future.

Implications

It is our experience that more GPs are willing to share their skills and knowledge. Furthermore, more students than in the past are interested in becoming a GP. Both developments are vital for the Austrian primary care system as almost 50% of active GPs are older than 50 years.

In many countries, teaching in general practice is already standard in medical education and thus, extensive research has been done on this topic. Our results are consistent with the existing body of

research in this field (9). In Austria, most medical training is taking place in hospitals. Undergraduate and postgraduate training of future GPs in Austria is behind international standards (10). Only two small academic departments of general practice exist, in Salzburg and Vienna, respectively. Lacking such support, the clerkship at the Medical University of Graz was organized in collaboration with an external group of GPs. Our survey shows that this clerkship was well accepted and that both students and GPs see a place for undergraduate teaching in primary care. Thus, we have shown that even without the capacity of an academic department of general practice it is possible to organize a network of teaching practices to the benefit of students and GPs. Our results might motivate colleagues who are in a similar position to follow our example.

Declaration of interest: The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of the paper.

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