LONGITUDINAL STUDY OF CAREER CHOICES OF A SUNY-UPSTATE COHORT OF MEDICAL STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT: A SUNY-Upstate cohort was observed during the four-year matriculation (1974-1978) of the students for changes in their career choices. Medical school exposure seemed to increase students' interest in all major specialties, with the exception of family practice for which there was an overall 3% decrease. Internship and residency appointments accepted indicated that 75% entered primary care specialties, 8% more than the national average for 1978.

Previous reports examined the medical career choices of students at State University of New York Upstate Medical Center (SUNY-Upstate) in 1967, 1968, and 1972. Although the 1972 survey had shown an increased interest in family practice, it could not be determined whether this represented a temporary trend or a true increase in interest for greater primary patient contact. It was felt that by making a longitudinal study of a single class it would be possible to evaluate whether four years of medical school experience could direct initial student interest away from family practice to other primary care specialties or vice versa.

Zimet and Held reported that, during medical school, pediatric and psychiatric specialties tended to lose students; family practice and surgery each attracted one fourth of the class and showed little change during four years at the University of Colorado. Their findings differ considerably from this study, which overlapped their report timewise; such variations might, however, be expected to result from geographical and temporal differences.

The present four-year longitudinal study of the class of 1978 cohort was begun in the fall of 1974. The career choices of the cohort were determined in each survey to monitor their changes with time. The eventual internship-residency (IR) appointments accepted by the cohort were obtained from the 1978 matching program prior to graduation from SUNY-Upstate.

METHODS

The same medical career choice questionnaire was completed in five surveys by a cohort of 87 members (76%) of the 115 members of the SUNY-
Upstate class of 1978 during their medical school attendance. The surveys were conducted on the day of matriculation in the fall of 1974 (Survey 1) prior to any medical school exposure and each spring thereafter from 1975 through 1978 (Surveys 2–5). Students who failed to complete a questionnaire in any one of the five surveys were removed from the study cohort.

The questionnaire included the student's name, age, sex, size of hometown community, and an estimate of whether the latter was urban, suburban, or rural. The latter variable was included because if the number of inhabitants were used alone, residence in a small town close to a metropolitan area could mask the effect of hometown size on the student's attitudes and career choices. Students were asked to indicate their current career choice among the 15 major specialties listed in the questionnaire or, if undecided, to so mark. Their responses were coded and keypunched for computer tallying. IR appointments accepted by the study cohort were obtained from the SUNY-Upstate Office of Student Affairs in the spring of 1978.

RESULTS

Career choices of the class of 1978 cohort by IR appointments accepted and survey are shown in Table 1. Interest in family practice, for example, increased after the first year, but the percentage of students accepting IR in this field was slightly lower than interest indicated at matriculation. Pediatrics, on the other hand, showed a steady, almost continuous increase from 5% to 13%. Interest in obstetrics-gynecology fluctuated during the period, reaching a peak at the end of the third year. Internal medicine, however, is the specialty that gained the most students, jumping from only 6% at matriculation to 36% upon acceptance of the IR appointments.

Although 27 members of the cohort (31%) had selected a 6- to 12-week elective in family practice in the department's rural primary care outreach program during the summer between their second and third years, no difference in career preference (Survey 3 versus Survey 4) for or against family practice was discernible from this experience.

The trends in career choices and IR appointments of male and female members of the cohort, shown in Table 2, demonstrate some interesting differences. Whereas males and females were almost equally interested in a career in pediatrics prior to their studies, more than three times as many females accepted a pediatric IR appointment; it was their most frequent choice. Internal medicine, on the other hand, was overwhelmingly selected by males as a career choice; the percentage increased from 4 to 41 over the four-year period. In the case of family practice, both sexes showed a fluctuating interest, which in the end represented a loss among the males and a slight gain among the females. It was the number two career choice for both sexes.

Orthopedics was more popular among males than females, but what