

PULSE ON CAREER CHOICES

Respondents to the National Physician Survey 2004 (NPS) were asked a number of questions about their career path. These questions included; what influenced them to choose medicine; when they made their decision; and why they selected their current practice location.

When asked to choose from a list of factors, the majority of NPS respondents indicated that intellectual stimulation/challenge (78.9%) and doctor-patient relationship (63.8%). A significant portion (41.5%) also considered workload flexibility and/or predictability as a factor leading to career choice.

Overall, when comparing specialist and family physician (FP) responses, intellectual stimulation (83.8% specialists; 74.5% FPs) and doctor-patient relationship (56.4% specialists; 70.7% FPs) were the most frequently mentioned factors contributing to selection of career path for each group. The third most common response for specialists, however, was influence of a mentor, with 42.1% of specialist respondents selecting this factor compared to just 20.1% of FPs. The third most common response among the FPs was workload flexibility and/or predictability (44.9% compared to 37.9% among specialists). Research opportunities was another factor more frequently chosen by specialists (16.7% compared to 5.3% of FPs) (Chart 1).

From the same list of factors, respondents were asked to choose the single most important factor influencing their career choice. Intellectual stimulation was the variable mentioned most frequently, with 36.9% choosing this, while 24.1% chose the doctor-patient relationship. While workload flexibility and/or predictability was frequently mentioned as a factor influencing career choice for all physicians just 9.9 % chose this at the single most important factor in making their career choice.

When looking at the single most significant factor to influence career choice, a difference was noted between FPs and specialists. More specialists (44.2%) indicated intellectual stimulation over the doctor-patient relationship (16.5%) while each of these factors was chosen by about a third of FPs (Chart 2).

The same top two factors remained consistent across age groups; however, the importance of workload flexibility/predictability is less frequently cited among older physicians, with just 5.4% indicating this factor as the most important influence on their career choice, while 17.6% of physicians aged less than 35 and 12.6% between 35 and 44 chose this factor. Conversely, the influence of a mentor was the key factor for 11% of physicians 65 years or older while only 3.4% of those less than 35 chose this as their most important influence.

Asked when they decided on their current field of medical practice, 27.4% of physicians indicated it was during clerkship. While specialist and FPs were equally likely to identify clerkship (27.8% and 27.1%) as when they had decided on their current field, 26.0% of specialists indicated making this decision during their residency compared to just 12.8% of FPs. FPs were more likely to make their decision after a period of time in practice (20.4%).

The timing of the decision on current field of practice tended to differ across the age groups. Physicians under the age of 44 more often indicated they made this decision during clerkship (37.5%); however, among physicians 55 and older, the most common response was after a period in practice (24.1%).

From a list provided, the most frequently mentioned reason for choosing the location of practice was family reasons/spousal influence with 47.1% of respondents citing this reason. Over a third of respondents also indicated liking the area (39.7%) and the availability of practice opportunities (37.2%) as reasons for selecting their current practice location.

Specialists were more likely to also cite opportunity for affiliation with a university (26.7%) than FPs (8.3%).

For male physicians the most frequently mentioned reason for choosing their practice location was that they liked the area (44.4%), closely followed by family reasons/ spousal influence and availability of practice location, each mentioned by 42% of males. However, almost two-thirds (62.7%) of female physicians, chose family reasons/spousal influence as one of their main reasons for choosing their current practice location. Their next most frequently cited factor was "liked the area" with about a third (35.2%) mentioning it (Chart 3).

The main reason for selecting current practice location varied across the age groups. While 58.3% of physicians under the age of 45 indicated family reasons/spousal influence as a main reason for making their choice, only 36.0% of physicians 55 or older indicated this reason. Older physicians tended to identify liking the area and availability of practice opportunities more often than family influences.

While financial recruitment/retention incentives are a more frequently mentioned response for those practicing in rural and remote locations (15.0%) compared to those in urban locations (3.7%), liking the area remains the most frequently mentioned factor (47.0%) for those choosing to practice in rural and remote areas. A third (32.6%) of rural/remote physicians indicated that the "community needs were a good match with my career interests" compared with just 18.9% of their urban counterparts.

A difference was also noticed between the choices of Canadian medical graduates and international medical graduates (IMGs) with respect to location of

practice. Over half (53.2%) of Canadian graduates indicated family reasons/spousal influence as a reason for choosing their current location while only a third (32.3%) of IMGs selected this response. "Practice opportunity was available" was the most frequently selected response for IMGs with almost half (47.6%) choosing it compared with 36.3% of Canadian graduates. Liking the area was a popular choice for all physicians (41%) regardless of where they graduated.

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