

Junior doctors training: is it really location, location, location?

Key Findings

- Good working conditions have most influence on trainees' career decisions.
- Good opportunities for partner and desirable geographic location are also important.
- Improving working conditions may help attract trainees to posts that are difficult to fill.

What problem was this research addressing?

Medical education and training gives trainee doctors a lot of choice both about the speciality they focus on and the geographic location in which they undertake training. This flexibility is beneficial to trainee doctors. However, flexibility makes it difficult for health care services to plan their workforce and match the available workforce with areas of need. In the UK, several specialties and geographical areas struggle to recruit the number of doctors they need to fill training posts. Indeed a new policy, the Scottish Targeted Bursary Scheme (NHS Scotland, 2016), has just been introduced to provide a bursary to attract trainees to posts in hard to fill programmes and locations with the current pilot addressing General Practice training within specific geographical areas.

What this research adds?

Much existing literature on medical career decision making focuses on specialty choice. We focused on common push-pull factors that influence trainee doctors' choice of training post across specialties (Cleland, 2016). In particular, we focused on push-pull factors that organisations have some control over. We used a discrete choice experiment (DCE) survey of 1,323 trainee doctors to explore their preferences for training posts.

Methods

A DCE is an economic method used to assess preferences, based on the assumption that a job can be described in terms of factors (e.g. working conditions) and levels (e.g. poor, good, excellent). People are asked to make choices between two jobs described by differing sets of attribute levels. The choices that people make provide information about how they are trading off the attribute levels. See Ryan et al (2008) for an overview of how this technique can aid the valuation of health and healthcare. The attributes and levels in this study, shown in Table 1, were informed by existing literature and an online qualitative study.

Table 1: Attributes and levels within the DCE

Characteristics	Description	Levels
Familiarity with hospital/unit	This refers to how familiar you are with the hospital or unit, whether you have rotated around it previously or have other knowledge of it.	Unfamiliar Quite familiar Very familiar
Geographical location	This refers to the geographical location of the training position including the amenities on offer and the proximity to your family/friends	Desirable Not so desirable
Opportunities for partner/spouse	How much does the location offer employment/training opportunities for your partner/spouse (if you have one).	Limited Good
Potential earnings	This refers to how your potential earnings compare against average career earnings in your chosen specialty after completing training.	Average earnings 5% above 10% above 20% above
Clinical/academic reputation	This refers to the prestige/status associated with the Hospital/Unit/Programme.	Indifferent Good Excellent
Working conditions	This refers to working conditions, such as rotas, amount of on-call, time off and/or staffing levels etc..	Poor Good Excellent

Best practice methods were used to select 18 choice sets (split into two sets of nine choices to reduce the respondent burden). Figure 1 presents an example choice. Respondents were asked to choose one of two training positions. The choice sets were included in an online survey of all trainee doctors in Scotland and the North of England in August 2013.

Figure 1: Example training position choice

Choice 1 of 9: Which position would you prefer?		
Geographical Location	Position "A" Desirable location	Position "B" Not so desirable location
Familiarity with hospital/unit	Unfamiliar	Very familiar
Opportunities for partner/spouse	Limited opportunities	Good opportunities
Potential earnings	5% above average	Average earnings
Working conditions	Good conditions	Poor conditions
Clinical/academic reputation	Indifferent reputation	Good reputation
Please tick one box	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

Policy relevance of research findings

Trainee doctors preferred training positions with good working conditions, good opportunities for their partner and those located in desirable geographic locations. Desirable locations are those which include proximity to family and friends. We estimated the earnings equivalent of these desirable factors. Earnings equivalents can be interpreted as the amount that a trainee would need to be paid to take on such a position. Earnings equivalents for these factors ranged from between 30% to nearly 50% of average earnings within the specialty. Across all factors included, a move from poor to good working conditions presented the highest value. Our results suggest organisations could focus on improving poor working conditions to good working conditions, promote linked training positions for medical couples, and provide access to career support for non-medical partners.

Alternatively, organisations might provide monetary incentives to trainees for accepting posts that do not meet their preferred conditions which is the underlying premise of the bursary scheme.

References

NHS Scotland (2016) Scottish medical training: Scottish targeted bursary scheme, NHS Education for Scotland, URL: <http://www.scotmt.scot.nhs.uk/recruitment/gp-recruitment/scottish-targeted-bursary-scheme.aspx> [Accessed 22/08/16].

Cleland, J., Johnston, P., Watson, V., Krucien, N. and Skåtun, D. (2016) 'What do UK doctors-in-training value in a post? A discrete choice experiment', *Medical Education*, 50(2)189-202.

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Research Highlights

- Trainee doctors prefer training positions with good working conditions, good opportunities for their partner and those located in desirable geographic locations.
- Results indicate that doctors in training require financial compensation to take on training posts with less favourable conditions, in less desirable geographic locations or in locations with fewer opportunities for partners/spouses
- A move from poor to good working conditions presented the highest value to doctors in training.
- In areas where recruitment to training posts is more challenging, organisations should focus on improving working conditions, promote linked training positions for medical couples, and provide access to career support for non-medical partners
- Otherwise organisations might use financial incentives such as the Scottish Targeted Bursary Scheme to attract trainees by compensating them financially for the otherwise undesirable aspects of the hard-to-fill training posts.

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