Training the Rheumatologists of Tomorrow: The WOMAC Experience

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BACKGROUND

Globally there is an increasing shortage of rheumatologists. In Canada there are currently 371 practitioners listed, 147 of them (39.6%) in Ontario. This is approximately half the number needed to reach the accepted ratio of 1 specialist : 50,000 population for adequate coverage.[1] Recognizing this problem, nine Canadian postgraduate rheumatology programs participated in a CRA/CIORA-funded qualitative study to determine how best to address this issue. Data from the two Ontario programs are presented here.

METHODS

Data Collection:

Rheumatology programs across Canada were asked to send invitation emails to their faculty and trainees. Interested parties could complete a self-administered online survey in English or French, or take part in an individual telephonic interview in English.

Data Analysis:

Survey data on two topics – how to attract trainees to the field of rheumatology and appropriate messaging to meet this goal -- were examined for themes and patterns using Thematic Framework Analysis. This was followed by a careful review of the transcripts to identify further examples or new information.

We found no major differences by research site and so combined the data during analysis. Information on what attracted respondents to rheumatology and appropriate messaging differed by respondent group (administrators/ teachers, senior learners and junior learners) and so were analyzed separately.

Presenting Data:

Illustrative excerpts from surveys and transcripts are provided along with their source using the following labels: AD = administrators/teachers, SR = senior residents and new graduates, JR = undergraduates and junior residents. The respondent is also referred to by number: for example "JR-07" denotes the seventh junior resident participating in the study.

RESULTS

Respondents:

There were 28 respondents, 17 learners and 11 administrators/teachers. Twenty-one of the participants completed an online survey and seven were individually interviewed. Respondents were classified into three groups based on education and current role: rheumatology program administrators and teachers (faculty and community-based teachers) (n = 11), senior residents (PGY4-6s) (n = 9), and junior residents (PGY1-3) plus one undergraduate who had completed a rheumatology rotation prior to joining the study (n = 8). Most of the administrators/teachers were female (70%), on average aged 48.8 years old, a division or program director (63%), and affiliated with a rheumatology program for 13 years. All of them were working in an academic centre. Over half of the senior residents (56%) were female, aged 25-34 years old (78%) and currently in a postgraduate program (89%).

What Attracted Respondents to Rheumatology:

Patient-related factors were a major reason why our respondents became rheumatologists ("interesting patient population" JR-9), including the ability to improve their quality of life ("You can make a very big difference in people's ability to live fully" AD-12). Senior residents mentioned the intellectual challenge and diverse subject matter, and junior residents identified "new and exciting therapies" (JR-4) as motivating factors. The diseases rheumatologists treat were also important to senior and junior residents ("The set of diseases is challenging" SR-6).

How to Attract Trainees:

Although the need for more exposure was widely recognized by respondents ("Exposure to the program is key" AD-16), there were different opinions as to the timing of such efforts. Some respondents emphasized informing undergraduates ("Communicate with medical students to increase the number of rheumatologists" SR-4). Others thought junior residents were a more appropriate audience ("More teaching during Internal Medicine rounds" JR-9) and still others emphasized exposing learners to rheumatology throughout their medical education ("We need to make education a priority, starting at medical school and carrying through to residency and rheumatology training programs." AD-9).

We identified three themes in the data on how to attract trainees: ensure adequate placements ("Have the capacity to train those we actually turn on" AD-15; "Arrange more students to rotate in rheumatology" SR-9); provide information sessions ("Emphasize what an interesting and gratifying career it is" AD-12; "Emphasize happy doctors" JR-10; "[Provide] more information in small groups and lectures" JR-8). Other ways of introducing future trainees to rheumatology were CRA summer studentships, the "Joy of Rheumatology" event, creating an organized program for academic half-days and exposure at conferences.

Messages to Attract Trainees:

When asked what they would tell undergraduates about a career in rheumatology, respondents in all three groups most often identified specific aspects of the field or daily work. Junior residents focused on new treatments ("Evolving treatment options" JR-11) and senior residents suggested describing rheumatology as a "fascinating, challenging field" (SR-8). Administrators/teachers noted the importance of being able to create the type of practice one wants ("[Tell them about your] ability to practice a specialty yet do as much general medicine as you desire" AD-16). Junior residents and administrators/teachers also recommended telling people about job availability and flexibility. Members of each group also suggested highlighting the fact that rheumatologists' lives are "reasonable, unlike some specialties" (AD-9) and "balanced" (SR-6, JR-8).

The respondents had very few negative comments about a career in rheumatology, noting that practitioners are very busy with patients ("hard work seeing many patients per day" AD-12) and paperwork (SR-9, SR-14), earn less than other specialists and face emotional challenges ("Sometimes severity of the diseases can be emotionally challenging" SR-5).

CONCLUSIONS

As part of a Canada-wide effort to increase the number of practitioners, personnel associated with Ontario postgraduate rheumatology programs – administrators and teachers, senior and junior learners – provided the insiders' view on how to meet this goal. The next steps will be to compare their insights with those of other programs across the country and form a country-wide working group to review suggestions and collaboratively develop material and methods to inform, recruit and educate potential trainees.

Photos taken by Rennée Tremblay, coordinator for the jointly hosted 10th annual McMaster/UWO PGY 1 & 2 Internal Medicine Residents Weekend in Rheumatology. The weekend gives internal medicine trainees with an interest in rheumatology the opportunity to spend time with faculty as well as practice examination stations, Royal College exam scenarios and OSCE exams.

[1]Karolinska Institutet/i3 Innovus. (2009). Comparator reports (final). Retrieved from: http://www. comparatorreports.se/ RA %20Barrier%20 Report_FINAL_05011. pdf.

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