

# Training The Rheumatologists of Tomorrow: The Learners Experience

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## BACKGROUND

**Background:** Canada faces a critical shortage of rheumatologists, particularly in rural isolated communities. To address this problem we surveyed and interviewed learners and faculty/administrators affiliated with rheumatology programs across Canada to identify ways to attract more trainees. The views of the learners are reported here.

## RESULTS

### Participants:

Participants: There were 51 participants. 31 of them junior and 20 of them senior learners; 88% of the sample completed the survey, 67% were female, and 84% were aged 25-34 years old. This represents a subset of the 103 total study participants.

### Ways to Increase Interest in Rheumatology:

Ways to Increase Interest in Rheumatology: The key to increasing interest in rheumatology is ongoing exposure starting in medical school (“Tell them it exists; I didn’t know about rheumatology until the start of Internal Medicine”, Sr-8) and early years of residency (“The best place for Rheumatology message is first year Internal Medicine ... although I wouldn’t shy away from [talking with] the med students”, Sr-21). One way is through formal means

## 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.

for both undergraduates (“[Offer] more teaching by rheumatologists in the medical curriculum so [medical] students are aware of what the specialty is”, Jr-6“), ([for] medical students ... you need an elective because it’s hard to like Rheumatology unless you’ve seen it”, Sr-04) and PGY1s (“A lot of people don’t get any rheumatology exposure during [residency] or only in the third year, and friends tell me, “If I had done this earlier ... I would have [selected] rheumatology”, Sr-04).

Informal exposure through close interactions with rheumatologists was also recommended (“We had different rheumatologists almost every day supervising us [in our undergraduate Rheumatology elective] ... so I saw a great spectrum at this ‘Bootcamp’”, Jr-23), including mentoring (“During my training in internal medicine Rheumatology was never on my radar until I did a rotation ... it’s because of the mentors I had in my rotation. These are the people who initially drew me to Rheumatology, kept me interested, and then I wanted to continue working with them”, Sr-04).

**Data Analysis:** We found no major differences in responses across research sites and so combined the data to compare findings from junior learners (undergraduate medical students, internal medicine PGY1-3s) and senior learners (PGY4-6s attending or recently graduated from a rheumatology program). We used Thematic Framework Analysis to identify key themes and linked them to illustrative quotes, presented in italics (to distinguish from researcher views) and labeled by group and individual ID (e.g. Jr-03, Sr-22).

**Messages:** Participants discussed specific messages to increase interest in the field, such as: the intellectual challenges (“It satisfies me on an intellectual level. Ultimately, at the end of the day this field fascinates me”, Jr-19; “I think the technical part is very interesting, like injections ... so if someone likes to do procedures it’s the best of two worlds”, Jr-22); the wide range of diseases encountered (“fantastically interesting diseases and presentations”, Sr-4); the importance of basic science in developing new treatments (“I really enjoy the immunological/autoimmune aspect”, Jr-16); patients (“the opportunity to make a significant positive impact in a patient’s life”, Jr-7; “[forming] long-standing patient relationships”, Sr-18); the existence of many job opportunities in academic and community settings (“I’d talk frankly about the job situation and how there are a lot of subspecialties that have no jobs ... [unlike Rheumatology]”, Sr-21), as well as good quality of life due to the opportunity for a balanced work/personal life (“Emphasize [that you are] happy doctors”, Jr-26). The few learners who noted negative aspects to being a rheumatologist commented on earning less than other specialists.

## CONCLUSIONS

**Conclusions:** This study, the first pan-Canadian qualitative investigation on how to increase the number of rheumatology trainees, has noted the importance of early and continuing exposure to various aspects of training and work in this field. The next step will be to form a national working group to collaboratively develop material and methods to further inform, recruit and educate the rheumatologists of tomorrow.

**Top photo:** 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, Photo taken by R. Tremblay,

**Middle photo:** Weekly Radiology rounds held to review and learn from the imaging of rheumatological cases. They are attended by both faculty and junior and senior learners and led by a radiologist. Photo taken by D. Crawshaw

**Bottom photo:** Rheumatology/Respirology Combined Clinic where a junior learner is attending as part of the MSK Boot Camp. McMaster rheumatology runs 2 or 4 week sessions for clerks to receive formal teaching sessions as well as clinic exposure in multiple settings. Photo taken by D. Crawshaw

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