Creating New Rheumatologists: The Canadian Experience

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BACKGROUND

Many countries face a critical shortage of rheumatologists. Based on an accepted benchmark of 1 specialist per 50,000 people as the number needed for effective patient care, recent figures show shortages in some EU Member states.1 Parts of the US and in Canada face a similar challenge. An environmental scan was designed to identify how Canadian rheumatologists are trained, perceived positive aspects of a career in this subspecialty, how programs inform and attract learners and what can be done collectively to attract more trainees.

METHODS

Data Collection:
Rheumatology programs across Canada were asked to send an invitation to all interested junior residents. 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:
Individual-level data from program faculty, administrators and learners across Canada (n = 123, 79 surveys, 25 interviews) found no major differences between research sites and so combined the data during analysis. Survey data were subjected to Thematic Framework Analysis to identify key concepts and issues from all sites. This was followed by a careful review of the transcripts to identify further examples or new concepts. Information on what attracted respondents to rheumatology and appropriate messaging differed by respondent group, learners (undergraduate medical students, junior residents [PGY1-3], senior residents [PGY4-6] and faculty/administrators [academic and program directors, faculty and laypersons involved with a rheumatology program]) and so were analyzed separately.

RESULTS

Participants:
Division and Program Directors of nine postgraduate rheumatology programs across Canada collaborated on this project. There were 103 respondents, 52 learners and 51 faculty/administrators. Most respondents were female (67% of survey responders and 55% of interviewees).

Ways to Increase Interest in Rheumatology:

The need to train more rheumatologists is widely recognized. Respondents expressed an overall enthusiasm about the profession (“La rhumatologie est la spécialité d’avenir au Canada” [L]). Rheumatologists on faculty noted the need to change the face of rheumatology (“We need to get rid of the label ‘arthritis centres’. Rheumatology is often thought of as dealing only with arthritis and diseases of the elderly. We need to [instead] promote rheumatology as a specialty with fascinating immunopathogenesis and cutting edge research at the frontier of discovery” [F]). Respondents advocate targeting both undergraduates (“People who influenced me were [role models] / I had as a medical student” [F]) and junior Internal Medicine residents. Most recommendations focused on ways to increasing exposure to the field through face-to-face interactions with rheumatologists, courses in medical school curricula, and specific messages to enhance knowledge of and interest in the field of rheumatology (“Tell them it exists; I didn’t know we’re not turning away interested Internal Medicine placements was also highlighted (“Make sure that people who influenced me were [role models] / I had as a medical student” [F]) and excellent job prospects (“excellent work-life balance” [F]) and excellent job prospects (“excellent work-life balance” [F]) and excellent job prospects (“excellent work-life balance” [F]).

Senior learners also noted the importance of early exposure to rheumatology for undergraduates rather than focusing efforts on reaching Internal Medicine residents. The need for adequate rotation placements was also highlighted (“Make sure that people who influenced me were [role models] / I had as a medical student” [F]). They also thought that formal courses in rheumatology and appropriate messaging differed by respondent group, learners (undergraduate medical students, junior residents [PGY1-3], senior residents [PGY4-6] and faculty/administrators [academic and program directors, faculty and laypersons involved with a rheumatology program]) and so were analyzed separately.

CONCLUSIONS

This is the first cross-Canada qualitative study providing the insiders’ view on what is needed to attract more trainees to the field of rheumatology. We found consensus on the need to inform potential trainees about rheumatology early in their education through a variety of messages and methods. Because of the shortage of rheumatologists it is important to increase awareness and information about the field by selectively using limited resources. This points to a need to collaboratively develop tools and methods to increase interest in rheumatology for use in multiple contexts.

Key to Quotes:

References:

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.

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