Medical Education: Perceptions of high school students and their parents in rural Southwestern Ontario

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Background

Canadian medical students differ significantly from the general population\(^1\)
- More likely to come from urban and high income areas
- More likely to have well-educated, professional parents

This skew may influence access to care in under-serviced regions of Canada
- Rural physicians are 4 to 5 times more likely to come from rural backgrounds\(^2\)

To serve the health care needs of patients from many geographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, it has been suggested that medical students should reflect this diversity\(^3\)

Our previous survey of high school students in rural Southwestern Ontario demonstrated an association between the perception of affordability as a barrier to attending medical school, and the respondents' parental level of education

Objectives

1. To identify whether socioeconomic status affects high school students’ views on accessibility to medical education.
2. To gain a better understanding of parental perception of medical school, accessibility for their children, and knowledge of options for financial assistance.

Methods

Study Populations:
1. High school students attending the Southwestern Ontario Medical Education Network (SWOMEN) MedQUEST program
   - MedQUEST is a 5-day camp for high school students interested in health care
   - Programs were located in Walkerton, Leamington, Sarnia, Mount Elgin, Seaforth, Chippewa First Nations and Chatham
2. One parent of each high school student

Questionnaire:
- Student survey included information regarding:
  - Perceived barriers to attending medical school, including affordability
  - Anticipated financing for post-secondary and medical school
  - Parental occupation and education level
  - Anticipated methods of paying for their child’s post-secondary education
  - Student surveys were matched to parent surveys using the last four digits of their home phone number

Results

Respondent Demographics:
- 121 respondents from the seven MedQUEST locations
  - Female: 76.0% (n=92)
  - Male: 23.1% (n=28)
  - 75.2% (n=91) were interested in becoming a physician
  - 99 parent respondents (89 reported family income information)

Family Income:
- 51.7% (n=46) were from high-income families (annual family income >$100,000)
- 29.2% (n=26) were from middle income families (annual family income $60,000-100,000)
- 20.2% (n=18) were from low-income families (annual family income <$60,000)

Discouragement:
- 30.3% (n=25) of parents stated expense of medical school as a potential reason for discouragement
- 100% of parents would support their child’s interest in medical school

Parental View on Anticipated Sources of Funding

Fig 1a. Funding for post-secondary education
- More parents in the low-income group anticipated using Ontario Student Assistance Program (OSAP) to fund post-secondary education (88.9%, n=16) compared to those in the high-income group (44.4%, n=20)
- More parents in the high-income group anticipated using a bank loan to fund medical education (64.4%, n=29) compared to those in the low-income group (27.8%, n=5)

Fig 1b. Funding for medical education
- Students’ perception of affordability as a barrier was not affected by parental income, but was affected by parental education level. Those whose parents both had a high school education or less were more likely to cite affordability as a barrier (p=0.049).

Financial Considerations:
- Perception of cost of medical school tuition ranged from $500 - $120,000 per year
  - 37.0% (n=30) of students responded within a reasonably correct range of cost
  - 48.3% (n=42) of parents responded within a reasonably correct range of cost

Conclusions

- In accordance with our previous study, the top three student-perceived barriers to attending medical school were competitiveness, grades, and affordability
- Parental views of anticipated sources of funding for education differed based on family income:
  - High income families were more likely to anticipate using bank loans for post-secondary education
  - Low income families were more likely to anticipate using OSAP for medical school
- Family income does not appear to affect student or parental perception of accessibility to medical school, including affordability

References

1 Dhalla IA, Kwong JI, Streiner DL, Baddour RE, Waddell AE, Johnson IL. Characteristics of first-year students in Canadian medical schools. CMAJ 2002; 166(8):1029