

Medical education in Turkey 1996

ABSTRACT—Medical education in Turkey has certain similarities with systems in the West, and is struggling to train its doctors to the highest standard. However, as a country it remains very much in between the cultures of East and West. Although the overall organisation of medical training is continually changing, and individual medical schools have varying ideals, the aim of this article is to provide an overview of the current system for training student doctors in Turkey

Turkey, with a population of about 60 million, lies geographically and spiritually between Asia and Europe. It is a cultural mix of religions, liberal and not so liberal opinions and incomes—a rapidly developing nation with a life expectancy that is increasing yearly, although it lags behind most developed countries (Table 1) [1]. The infant mortality, although also improving, is about 54 per 1,000 live births [2]. A high proportion of the population is young, with 34.1% under 14 years and only 4.7% of the population over the age of 65 [2]. About 3.5% of Turkey's gross national product (GNP) is spent on health services; this is low in comparison both with the World Health Organisation recommendation that 5–7% needs to be spent to achieve reasonable health levels [3] and with the 9.7% of GNP spent by European nations (Table 1) [4]. There are more than 30 medical schools in Turkey, several having opened in the last few years [3]. They aim to provide both medical student training and research on the same site. The basic buildings comprising the teaching facility are constantly being added to, so that a mixture of styles is often found within one campus (Fig 1).

Acceptance into medical school

Education in Turkey is compulsory only from seven until 12 years of age. At 12, pupils must decide whether or not to continue their schooling. If they decide to continue, over the next six years they must achieve good grades every year (defined as an average of at least 5/10 in each subject) in order to obtain their school diploma at the age of about 18. If the student fails to gain the required grading at any stage, the year must be repeated. The rules for the diploma system are constantly changing. With this diploma,

students have the option to take a substantial final examination set by a national body called the Student Selection and Placement Centre, (*öğrenci seçme yerleştirme merkezi* [ÖSYM]). The ÖSYM examination is in two parts and covers every subject taken in school. Success in the basic Part 1 enables the student to take Part 2 two months later, a longer and more difficult examination. At this stage, a prospective medical student submits an official list of 24 choices of university and subject. Based on the results of this final examination, a computer program dictates whether a student can go to university and study the subject of his or her choice. The higher the grades the more likely it is that the application to the preferred university and for the chosen subject will be successful. There are no interviews at the university and no special examinations specifically for prospective medical students. National service is currently obligatory for men over 18 years and lasts 18 months. Male students who have been accepted into medical school can opt to do their national service first. Alternatively it can be undertaken later (reduced to a total of eight months) or qualified doctors can work for 18 months as medical personnel later in their careers.

Intake to medical school is closely regulated, allowing 5,400 students to enter each year, about half of whom are women. Most students entering medical school are aged about 18 and come straight from school. Students tend to live at home if possible, often choosing their university for its proximity to their home, although some rooms for students are available, allocated by the Turkish government or through various charitable awards. Universities in western Turkey are considered more prestigious, and are therefore oversubscribed. In several medical schools, medicine can be studied with English textbooks (eg Hacettepe and Marmara schools of medicine). In order to do this, higher grades must be achieved in the ÖSYM examination and, in addition, an extra preparatory year of study undertaken at the medical school before starting the medical and scientific course. In general, there are too few university

Table 1. Life expectancy and health care costs in Turkey and developed countries [1]

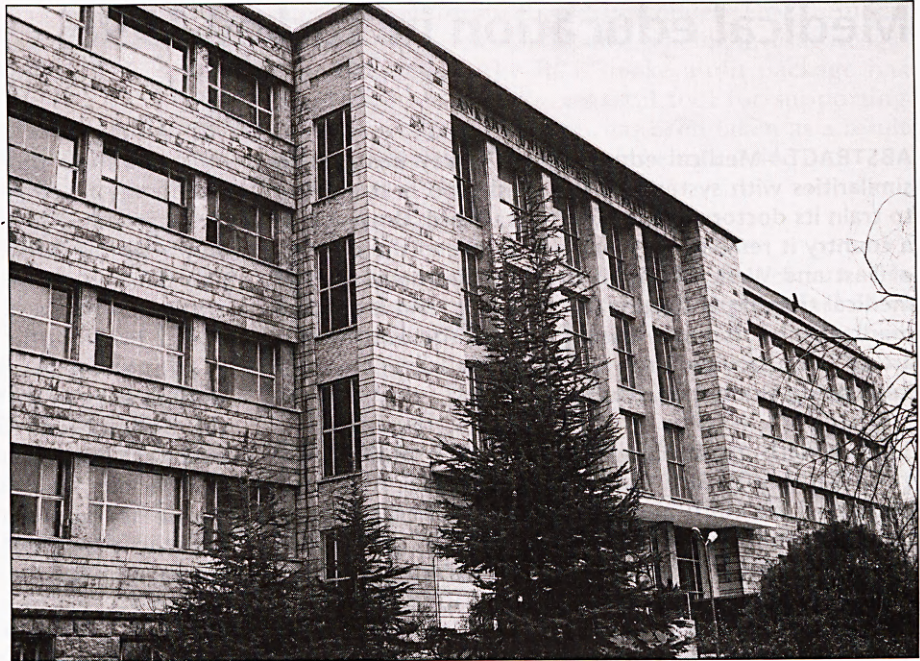
	Turkey	England & Wales	USA	Japan
Life expectancy (years)	67	75	76	78
Total lifetime health care expenditure per person (£)	2,970	19,215	29,010	31,530

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Figure 1. Ankara University Faculty of Medicine (Morphology Building) completed in 1967 (Photo: Erdogan Salgirbaju)



lecturers to provide the training for the numbers of medical students entering each year. There is also a shortage of experimental equipment and instruments. Medical undergraduate training is divided into three years preclinical training, followed by three years clinical study.

Preclinical training

Medical schools in Turkey tend to fall into one of two categories. The first employs traditional teaching methods, with basic science principles and theoretical learning in the three preclinical years. An example is Ankara University Faculty of Medicine. The second type of school, exemplified by the Hacettepe Faculty of Medicine established in 1963, attempts to create a more integrated course, with system-based teaching and early exposure of students to patients and their clinical problems [5]. In both types of school, learning is generally lecture-based, with regular examinations in all topics throughout the three years. There are few opportunities to take an intercalated science degree, although in certain universities this may be possible later, in parallel with the normal course of study.

Clinical training

The organisation of the clinical years varies although the overall content is basically similar. For example, at Ankara University the first clinical year is spent doing two months each in general medicine, surgery, obstetrics and gynaecology, and paediatrics, with continuous assessment and an oral examination for each. Within each of these major subjects, the students must pass

individual assessments in specialties such as cardiology and nephrology. The second clinical year is spent studying further specialties, including ear, nose and throat, ophthalmology, and dermatology, each for 15 days and with a similar examination system. The final year is termed the 'intern' year. During this period, students act as doctors on the wards, except that they are closely supervised and cannot prescribe. The work they carry out includes some of the tasks traditionally carried out in Turkey by nurses, for example blood taking. Interns must spend two months in each of the specialties from the first clinical year, and can then choose further specialties for the remaining four months. There is no final examination at the end of this intern year, but consultants must certify that the stipulated months have been satisfactorily carried out in their respective specialties. In certain universities, but not all, a thesis must also be submitted in order to qualify as a doctor at the end of the clinical years. There appears to be no specific time set aside as an elective period abroad. Doctors qualify with the degree of MD.

Registration and prospects

In 1995, it was estimated that 8,700 doctors were unemployed in Turkey. Many of them will also have completed general professional training. Some will have to leave Turkey to further their training abroad, in Germany where there is a tradition for Turkish doctors to go for further study, but also to the USA; others may remain jobless for years, especially those who have trained to become general practitioners. Further training is currently being reorganised [3]; it

remains to be seen how Turkey decides to remedy the problem of the waste of this highly qualified workforce at the same time as solving its own internal political struggles.

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