

# Medical students in general practice: How do patients feel?

FIONA COOKE

GAVIN GALASKO

VANDANA RAMRAKHA

DUNCAN RICHARDS

ANWEN ROSE

JULIA WATKINS

## SUMMARY

**Background.** The General Medical Council has recommended that medical students should gain more experience in general practice.

**Aim.** The study set out to determine patients' reactions to the presence of medical students in general practice consultations.

**Method.** Patients attending a random sample of general practice surgeries completed a questionnaire following consultation with and without a medical student present in six general practices in the Oxford area.

**Results.** The questionnaires were completed by 278 patients. Only eight (3%) of all respondents had negative responses to the presence of a medical student. Of those completing questionnaires following a teaching consultation, 107 (56%) felt positively about the presence of students, compared with 36 (41%) who had attended a non-teaching surgery. Only three patients (1%) felt the quality of the consultation to be impaired by the presence of a student, while 48 patients (17%) felt there to be some improvement. The majority felt that the sex of the student was unimportant, but significantly more female than male patients (17% versus 5%) felt that it made a difference.

**Conclusion.** Only a small proportion of patients object to the presence of a medical student in general practice consultations. A significant minority said that the presence of a student improves the consultation.

**Keywords:** medical students; teaching; general practice; patients' views.

## Introduction

THE General Medical Council has recommended that medical students should gain more experience in general practice,<sup>1</sup> medical student teaching is increasingly taking place in the community,<sup>2-4</sup> and more practices will be needed to provide the necessary placements. Clearly, it is important that general practitioners do not decline to take part in teaching for fear that the presence of students would be unacceptable to their patients. Studies have shown that the majority of patients are content to see students in the hospital setting,<sup>5-7</sup> but there is little evidence from

general practice, where the personal and ongoing relationship with the family doctor is a key part of the interaction.

During a 6-week general practice attachment, six clinical medical students carried out a questionnaire-based study to test the hypothesis that the presence of a student does not diminish, and may improve, the quality of the consultation as perceived by the patient.

## Method

The study was conducted in six general practices in the Oxford area: two were rural, three suburban and one city-centre. All practices were associated with the University Department of Public Health and Primary Care and had medical students in the practice for teaching for 36 weeks of every year.

A simple questionnaire was designed, asking four questions (Table 1). Surgeries (excluding special clinics) were chosen during 2 weeks of data collection when students were and were not present. At each chosen surgery, every patient was handed a questionnaire at the end of the consultation and asked to complete the questionnaire before leaving the building. Patients were assured of anonymity.

Single-strata analyses were evaluated on Epi-Info Version 5 using the chi-square test together with Yates corrected *P*-values. Only *P*-values of less than 0.05 were reported as significant.

## Results

A total of 278 questionnaires were returned (Table 2). The precise response rate was not measured, but when students were present and handed out the questionnaire, they collected the responses directly after the surgery and found the response to be almost complete. When no student was present, the completeness of the sample was less certain.

A total of 190 (57 male and 133 female) patients were recruited at surgeries when medical students were being taught, and 88 (36 male and 52 female) when there was no teaching. Four patients declined to have a student present. The data are presented according to whether the patient was offered a consultation with a student present (intention to treat basis). Because so few patients declined to see a student, the results differ little from analysis on the basis of a student being present.

Only eight (3%) of respondents expressed negative feelings about having a medical student present, while 143 (51%) felt positively about a student being present. Out of the eight patients expressing negative feelings, three were from the group of four patients who had declined to see a student. In each practice, more patients expressed positive feelings about students following a consultation with a student present than when there had been no student; the difference was statistically significant for all the practices taken together. Out of patients who had experienced a consultation when teaching was taking place, 107 (56%) felt positively about the consultation, as opposed to 36 (41%) of those who had experienced a non-teaching consultation (*P* = 0.02).

There was no difference in the opinions of male and female patients except on whether they thought the sex of the student to be important. Although 87% of all patients felt that the student's sex was not important, within those who were concerned, there were significantly more women than men [32 (17%) women

Fiona Cooke, Gavin Galasko, Vandana Ramrakha, Duncan Richards, Anwen Rose and Julia Watkins, clinical medical students, Oxford University Medical School.

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**Table 1.** Questionnaire.

(1) What are your feelings about having a medical student present during a consultation with your GP?	Positive Negative Neutral
(2) Would the sex of the medical student make a difference?	Yes No
(3) Do you feel you get a different amount of time with the doctor if a medical student is present?	More Less Same
(4) Do you feel having a medical student present alters the quality of the consultation?	Better Worse Same

versus five (5%) men,  $P = 0.01$ ].

The questions on the duration and quality of the consultation were answered identically by 217 (78%) of respondents. In total, 227 (82%) felt there was or would be no change owing to the presence of a student. Out of the 18% that felt there was or would be a change in the quality of the consultation, 17% felt it would be for the better.

## Discussion

The vast majority (97%) of patients had either positive or neutral feelings about the presence of medical students, and only four out of 278 patients refused to see one. Over half of patients expressed positive feelings about having a student present, and this positive feeling was significantly higher in patients who had just experienced a consultation with a student present. Furthermore, out of the eight respondents who expressed negative feelings about having a student present, only two had actually seen a student. Because only one of the six practices warned patients about student presence at the time of booking (and this practice contained two out of the four patients who declined to see a student), it is unlikely that this effect is caused by patients who favour students booking into teaching surgeries. The findings suggest that medical students are welcome in the general practice setting and that, as patients in the community become more familiar with the presence of students, this acceptability will rise.

There is some concern regarding the extent to which patients

perceive the sex of the student as a problem. Although the large majority were unconcerned, out of those who were concerned, the majority were women. Six patients commented spontaneously that the nature of their complaint would alter their views on the importance of the sex of the student.

With regard to the length and quality of the consultation, over three-quarters of respondents answered both questions identically, suggesting that a feeling of being unhurried is an important component of quality. Most respondents felt that the presence of a student made no difference, but it was striking that, while only 1% of patients commented adversely, 17% felt that the presence of a student improved the quality of the interaction. This may be because several practices allocated more time for consultations when a student was present; however, one of the patients commented spontaneously that they benefited from hearing the doctor's explanation to the student.

A recent letter in *The British Journal of General Practice*<sup>8</sup> reports a postal survey of patients showing that students are found acceptable by 86% of patients, with 4% finding the consultation easier and 10% more difficult. Our survey supports the acceptability of students to patients in general practice, and goes further in suggesting that a significant number of patients find the presence of students beneficial.

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## Address for correspondence

Ms Anwen Rose, Clinical Medical Student, c/o University Department of Public Health and Primary Care, Radcliffe Infirmary, Oxford OX2 6HE.

**Table 2.** Patients' opinions on the effect of the presence of medical students during consultations.

	All patients (n = 278)	Teaching consultation (n = 190)	Non-teaching consultation (n = 88)	Female patients (n = 185)	Male patients (n = 93)
<b>Feelings about students</b>					
Positive	143 (51%)	107 (56%)	36 (41%)	95 (51%)	48 (52%)
Neutral	127 (46%)	78 (41%)	49 (56%)	85 (46%)	42 (45%)
Negative	8 (3%)	5 (3%)	3 (3%)	5 (3%)	3 (3%)
<b>Sex of student important?</b>					
Yes	37 (13%)	24 (13%)	13 (15%)	32 (17%)	5 (5%)
No	241 (87%)	166 (87%)	75 (85%)	153 (83%)	88 (95%)
<b>Effect on the duration of the consultation</b>					
Longer	47 (17%)	32 (17%)	15 (17%)	30 (16%)	17 (18%)
Same	227 (82%)	156 (82%)	71 (81%)	152 (82%)	75 (81%)
Shorter	4 (1%)	2 (1%)	2 (2%)	3 (2%)	1 (1%)
<b>Effect on the quality of the consultation</b>					
Better	48 (17%)	31 (16%)	17 (19%)	30 (16%)	18 (19%)
Same	227 (82%)	157 (83%)	70 (80%)	154 (83%)	73 (79%)
Worse	3 (1%)	2 (1%)	1 (1%)	1 (1%)	2 (2%)