

# Career intentions of preregistration house officers and the influence of career advice

**Preregistration house officers were asked about their career intentions several times during their second 6-month posting. Most had decided already. Fewer planned to enter general practice at the end than at the start. Access to Web-based career advice and using Sci45, a computer-based career advice programme, were more valued than discussion with a career adviser or clinical tutor.**

## Introduction

Medical students and doctors in training use a variety of methods in choosing their final careers. Their choices do not always match the skills and aptitudes they possess. One consequence of a mismatch between aspirations and opportunities is that they waste training time in the first few postgraduate years (Paice, 2002). Eleven years later only 65% ended up in the specialty that was their first choice as a preregistration house officer (PRHO) (Edwards et al, 1997).

Improving the quality of career information, advice and counselling is vital if the reforms of postgraduate medical training embodied in *Modernising Medical Careers* (UK Strategy Group, 2004) and leading into speciality training programmes are to be successful. The personality and aptitude of students should be taken into account. For example, some surgeons are convinced that they can identify a personality type associated with success in their field and this has been supported by recent longitudinal psychological analyses (Thomas, 1997; McManus, 2005). Quality of life has become increasingly important to young doctors in making their choices (Lambert et al, 2003; Stern and Paice, 2003).

A number of formal and informal ways have been developed to address the paucity of career guidance. One of these is Sci45, a computer-based psychometric tool that contains 130 structured questions about work and lifestyle preferences (Gale and Grant, 2002). These questions were designed after analysing the answers to questions put to specialists representing 46 different medical careers and vali-

dated on a similar group of doctors. Answering these questions enables the programme to suggest ten specialties to which the respondent seems best suited, as well as the ten to which he or she seems least suited.

The aim of this study was to investigate whether a structured approach to career advice during the second PRHO 6-month placement affected career post intentions, and how Sci45, web-based information and personal advice from a clinical tutor or

tutor or the assistant clinical tutor. At one trust, fifteen PRHOs received their advice from a member of the London University Careers Advice Department (this has been a longstanding arrangement at this hospital).

Each PRHO was also provided with a session, varying from 30 to 60 minutes, in which they had access to the careers advice pages of the London Deanery website (<http://www.londondeanery.ac.uk/CareerGuide/index.asp>). After random allocation, 57 of the PRHOs (56%) also completed the 130 structured questions of the Sci45 computer programme, three of whom had used it before. Five of those PRHOs who were not offered this session had prior experience of Sci45 and so were included in the Sci45 group.

## Questionnaires

Three structured questionnaires were completed by PRHOs at five district general hospitals and three teaching hospitals in London. They were returned to the clinical tutors who distributed them, but the PRHOs were identifiable only by the author, so that questionnaires could be matched with previous questionnaires completed by the same doctor. The first questionnaire was completed at the start of the second 6-month posting. The second questionnaire was given at the time career advice was given, around 3 months later, and the third questionnaire was given at the end of the year.

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career advisor compared in terms of helpfulness and influence on career intentions with more conventional sources of information and advice.

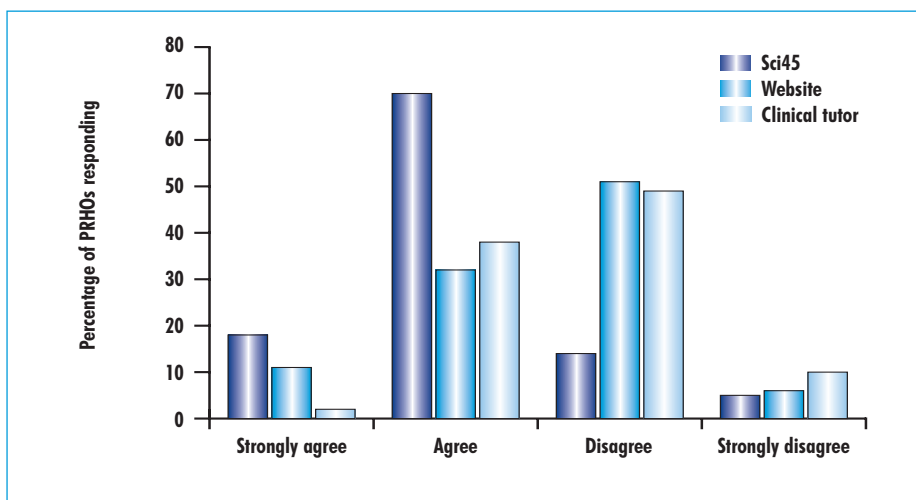
## Method Participants

Ten district general hospitals and five teaching hospitals in London were invited to join the study, of which five district general hospitals and three teaching hospitals agreed to take part. All their 151 PRHOs were invited to take part in the study.

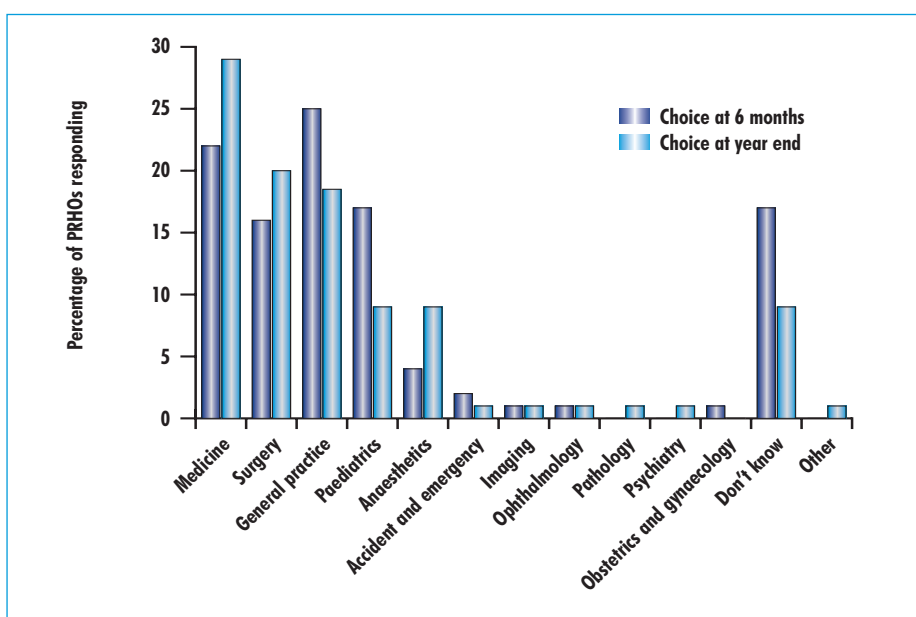
## Career advice sources

Each PRHO took part in a one-to-one 30-minute advice session with the clinical

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**Figure 1.** Responses to the statement 'Sci45, the London Deanery website or the clinical tutor sessions were useful'. PRHO = preregistration house officer.



**Figure 2.** Career choices of preregistration house officers (PRHOs) at 6 months and at year-end.

## Results

A total of 101 PRHOs took part: 84 (83%) returned all three questionnaires, 89 (88%) completed the first questionnaire, 94 (93%) completed the second questionnaire and all 101 (100%) completed the exit questionnaire. However, not all questionnaires were answered in full. In terms of the different forms of advice, 52 (51%) used the Sci45, 42 (42%) used the website and all 89 who completed all three questionnaires had a session of career counselling.

Asked in the first questionnaire about their perceptions of the effectiveness of previous career advice and whether they had made a career decision, 40 PRHOs (48%) thought that they had good advice

as medical students, 52 (58%) thought that they had an effective network of advisors already, 62 (70%) already had an approximate idea of their final career pathway, while 50 (58%) of these had made a firm career choice.

Forty-seven (76%) of those PRHOs who were clear about their career thought that they possessed the natural skills and attributes that were required in that career. One PRHO (2%) was unsure and thirty-three (53%) felt strongly that they did not have them.

Of the 52 PRHOs who had used the Sci45 programme 43 (89%) thought that it was useful (Figure 1). Similarly, 20 (43%) of the 47 who had used the Deanery website found it a valuable

source of information and 36 (40%) found the career advice session with the clinical tutor useful.

The following results refer to the 89 respondents who completed all three questionnaires (Figure 2). At the start, general practice, medicine and surgery were the most popular choices and 15 (17%) were undecided. By the end of the year the number of PRHOs considering a career in general practice and paediatrics had fallen, while the numbers considering surgery and medicine both rose. Those who were undecided fell from 17% (15) to 9% (8). Those who changed their career choice over the 6 months amounted to 21% (19).

A total of 97 PRHOs returned questionnaires at the time the careers advice sessions were undertaken and 34 (72%) of those who used Sci45 found it the most useful session (Figure 3). Only 47 used the website, although all were offered access to it and of these seven (15%) found it the most useful, with a further 30 (42%) rating it the second best session. Of the 89 PRHOs who met either the clinical tutor or another careers advisor 61 (83%) found this session the least useful.

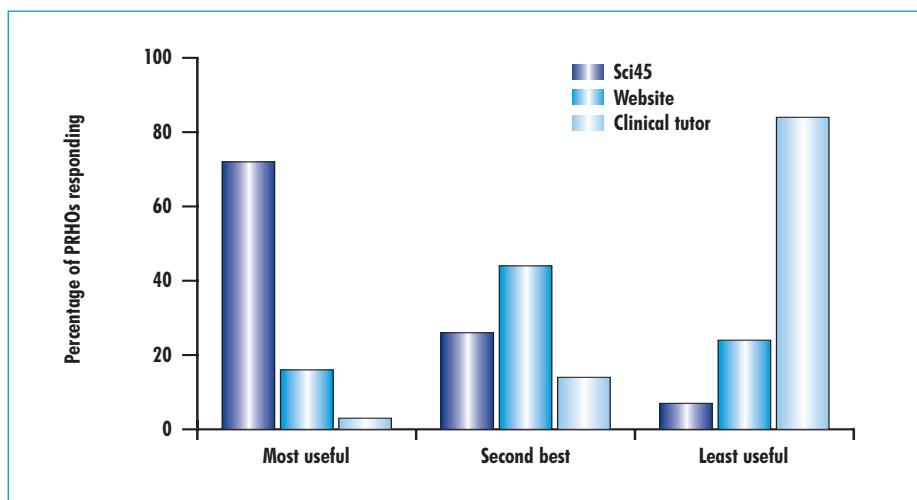
At the end of the placement, PRHOs were asked whether taking part in the career advice project had influenced their choice. Only nine (12%) felt that it had; the majority (69, 87%) considered it had not affected their choice at all.

PRHOs were asked to volunteer the most important influence that directed their choice towards a particular medical career and 101 responded. The influences they described were various (Figure 4) and it can be seen that the majority (72%) of them are based in some way upon their previous experiences.

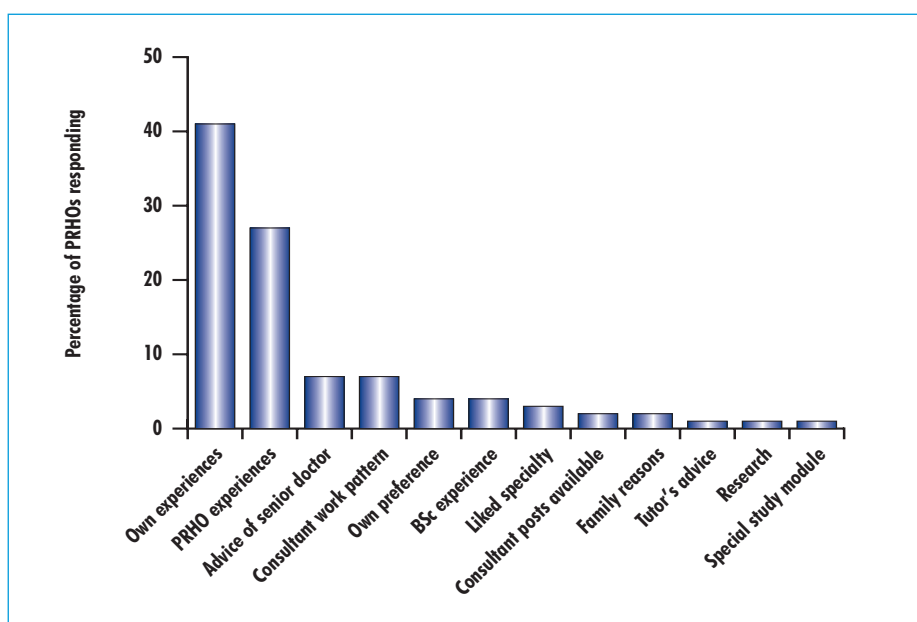
## Discussion

The response rate was high, some messages are clear and inferences concerning the implementation of a career advice strategy may be drawn from the results, even though PRHOs show that their own experiences shape their decisions about future careers.

This study shows that, by the time that PRHOs start their second 6-month placement, most have already decided on their future careers in the profession and have a clear idea of what they want to do. Most of



**Figure 3. Perceived comparative usefulness of Sci45, website and clinical tutor sessions.**  
PRHO = preregistration house officer.



**Figure 4. Reasons for career choice.** PRHO = preregistration house officer.

this cohort was reasonably satisfied with their sources of information and advice up to this stage of their training. Their positive responses to the interventions show that having already decided did not prevent them from finding advice interesting.

This study confirms what has been found by others: that it is experience in the workplace, both undergraduate and post-graduate, that doctors feel has helped them most to decide on their future career (Morrison, 2004).

Formal career advice sessions 6 months into the PRHO year added little since only 8% of those previously undecided had now made a decision, although 21% had changed their career choice. It seems that the less personal and more flexible com-

puter-based methods were seen more positively than the one-to-one sessions with tutors, although all were seen to some extent as useful.

By the time PRHOs start their second post, most of them declare that they have already made clear decisions about their careers. However, there is evidence that the distribution of career intentions at this stage does not match the final careers actually taken up by trainees later on (Petrides and McManus, 2004). The principal implication from this is that exposure to the different specialties and general practice must be given as widely and as early as possible if career choice is to be influenced (Richard et al, 2004). **BJHM**

*Conflict of interest: none.*

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### KEY POINTS

- Most preregistration house officers (PRHOs) have decided upon their future careers by 6 months after qualification.
- The intention to enter general practice falls off during the PRHO year.
- PRHOs prefer to seek advice on the internet and from Sci45 than from career advisers.
- The strongest influence on their choice of career was their own experience.
- 'Tasters' and career advice should be offered as early as possible.