

Careers fairs for medical students and junior doctors

Careers fairs are an integral part of careers management. This article looks at how to plan and run a careers fair and what attendees valued about a careers fair held in the West Midlands.

Introduction

In 2005 as part of Modernising Medical Careers (MMC) (Department of Health, 2003), *A Guide to Career Management – an approach for medical schools, Royal Colleges and Trusts* was published (Department of Health, 2005). Planned careers events are listed as integral to this guidance, and careers conferences either on an annual or biannual basis are recommended. There is little in the literature about careers fairs. This article describes how the authors planned and organized a deanery careers fair and looks at what aspects of the careers fair attendees valued.

Methods

Careers fair planning

In 2005, as part of MMC, a deanery careers steering group team was established. This includes the associate dean for careers, the careers manager, both representatives and medical students from the three West Midlands medical schools (Birmingham, Warwick and Keele), the head of the foundation programme, two associate deans for the foundation years, deputy postgraduate dean and GP director.

The programme for the careers fair was discussed by the careers steering group, particularly consulting the foundation and medical student representatives about what they wished to have in a careers fair and referring to themes frequently requested of the careers manager by both these groups. After consultation among the group, Saturday 30 June 2007 was the agreed date for the careers fair, ensuring that medical students would not be away

on their electives. A Saturday was the preferred option to ensure that as many of the foundation trainees as possible could attend.

Medical students in years 4 and 5 and foundation year 1 and 2 doctors were invited to attend the fair by e-mail several weeks in advance. Reminders were sent by the medical schools and foundation deans 1 week before the event. Registration before the event was not undertaken as the administrative infrastructure in the deanery was unable to provide such support.

Content of careers fair

Programme directors of all 64 specialties were contacted 3 months in advance and asked to provide a careers stand. The frequent questions asked of the careers manager indicated that there was overwhelming demand for workshops on specialty and run-through programmes and on foundation training. Workshops lasted for up to 45 minutes. A talk was given as to the current situation regarding specialty or foundation training and then attendees asked questions. These two workshops were run twice during the day. A number of enquiries had been received from overseas doctors and a third workshop was run on the new immigration rules.

Careers fair evaluation

As part of good practise the authors wanted to seek feedback from users about the careers fair, including whether it was helpful in an age of widespread internet use. A 12-item questionnaire was drawn up by the careers steering group to look at what attendees had valued about the careers fair, their reasons for attending and if they felt better informed about MMC. Free-text comments were also invited. Attendees were asked to complete the questionnaire as they were leaving the careers fair. The results of the questionnaire were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and loaded into SPSS version 15 for statistical analysis.

Results

A total of 71 trainees handed in a completed questionnaire. The exact number of attendees was not recorded but was estimated at around 200. Ninety two per cent of respondents were either students or foundation doctors in Birmingham and 8% were from the Warwick Medical School area. Of questionnaires 90% (64/71) were completed by medical students and 10% by foundation year 1 doctors. Thirty one per cent (20/64) of students were in year 4 and 69% (44/64) in year 5.

Specialty stands

Just over a third (23/64) of specialties provided a stand at the careers fair. All major specialties were represented. Too little notice of the careers fair or unavailability because the fair was held on a weekend were the reasons for non-attendance by specialties.

The popularity of specialty stands is shown in *Figure 1*. Paediatrics and general practice were the most popular stands with just under half the respondents (31) visiting them. Stands visited by less than 10% (7/71) of respondents were ear, nose and throat surgery, plastic surgery, urology, rehabilitation medicine, nuclear medicine, cardiothoracic surgery, public health, respiratory medicine, genitourinary medicine, medical microbiology, neurology and histopathology.

Reasons for coming to the careers fair and suggested improvements

The main reasons for coming to the careers fair are shown in *Table 1* and included gaining information on specialties, careers information in general, application for posts, the medical training application service (MTAS), foundation programmes and MMC. Suggestions which were made for improving the careers fair included more specialty stands, more information on the application process and MTAS, and more time for questions (*Table 2*).

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Expectations

Ninety per cent felt that the careers fair had met their expectation with a Likert score of ≥ 4 (1=disagree with statement; 6=agree) (Figure 2). Ninety four per cent (63/67) said that they would attend the careers fair again and all those who answered the question on whether or not they would recommend the careers fair to others (68/71) were positive in their response.

Information

Ninety one per cent (64/70) felt better informed about MMC with a Likert score of ≥ 4 (Figure 3). Two 5th year medical students gave a score of 2 when asked if

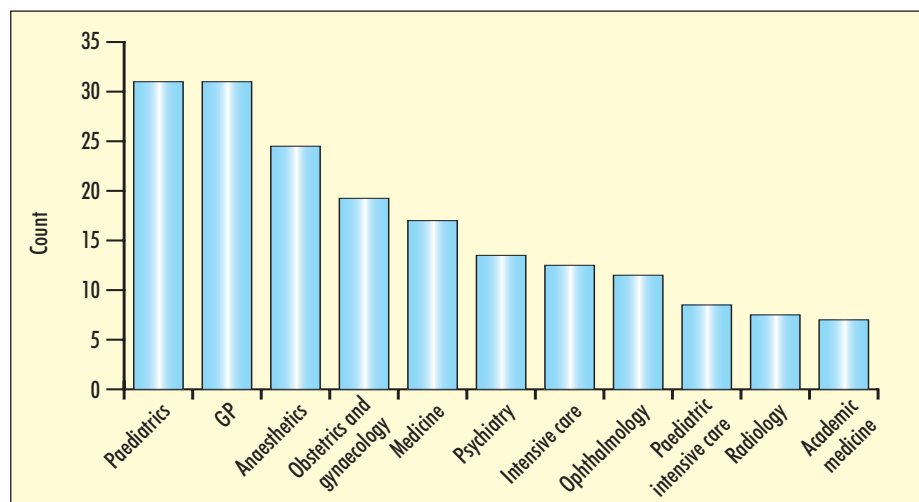


Figure 1. Popularity of stands.

Table 1. Themes about reasons for coming to the careers fair which emerged from free-text comments

Reasons for coming to the careers fair (verbatim comments in italics)	No of responses
Specialty information <i>Wanted to know more about certain specialties</i> <i>More info on specialties</i> <i>Tips and advice on gaining specialty experience</i>	44
General careers information <i>To talk to clinicians about their chosen careers</i> <i>To find out how the careers process worked</i> <i>Info on Birmingham hospitals</i> <i>To get more information about postgraduate training</i> <i>Find out about competition</i> <i>Opportunities in W Midlands Deanery</i>	34
More application and medical training application service (MTAS) information <i>Confused about MTAS procedures</i> <i>To gain more information about application procedures</i> <i>To learn more about MMC and MTAS</i>	27
Foundation programme information <i>To learn about FY1 and 2 specialist training</i>	19
Modernising medical careers (MMC) information <i>Learn more about the MMC process</i> <i>Confirm direction of MMC</i>	16
Concern about getting job <i>Wanted to know more about obstacles along the career path</i> <i>Gain greater understanding of jobs available</i>	8
Immigration rules <i>Clarify status on international medical students</i> <i>Confirm immigration rules</i>	4
GP information <i>To find more information on applying for general practice vocational training scheme</i>	3
Organization of training <i>Finding out more about how training is organized</i>	2
Academic posts information	1
Working abroad	1

Table 2. Themes about suggestions for improving the careers fair which emerged from free-text comments

Suggestions for improving careers fair (verbatim comments are in italics)	No of responses
More specialty stands <i>Someone to answer questions on the application process</i>	9
More application and medical training application service (MTAS) information <i>More advice on improving selection chances for training programmes</i> <i>How to gain a competitive edge in the specialty of your choice</i>	4
More time for questions <i>More sessions so more people can ask questions</i> <i>Open Q & A sessions</i>	4
Advertising better	3
Good experience	3
Handouts <i>Some of the specialties didn't have any written information and it is hard to remember what everyone has said once you've left their stand</i>	2
Longer duration <i>Perhaps over whole weekend/Saturday because would be nice to have longer because so many people came</i>	2
Fewer specialty stands <i>Fewer stands in the rooms - very difficult to hear and talk to specialists as it was so noisy in the rooms!</i>	1
More seats	1
People turn up	1
Quicker registration	1
5th year students only <i>Only do exclusive for 5th years who have finished cuts nos therefore more time</i>	1

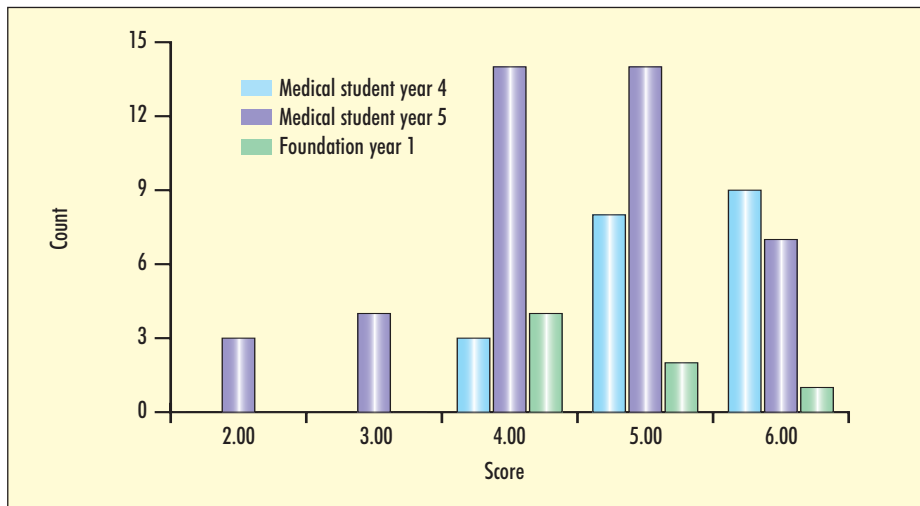


Figure 2. Careers fair met expectations of attendees. A score of 1 indicated disagreement with the statement that the careers fair met the expectation of the attendee while a score of 6 indicated agreement.

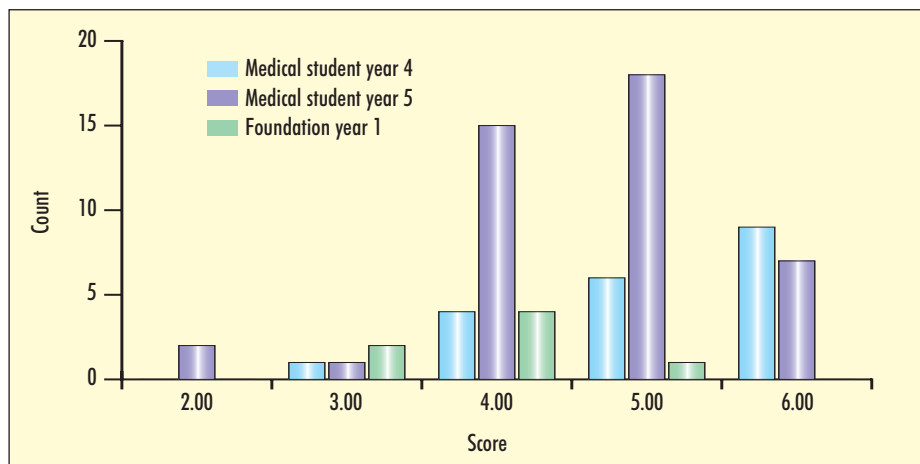


Figure 3. Feeling better informed about MMC. A score of 1 indicated disagreement with the statement that the attendee felt better informed about MMC while a score of 6 indicated agreement.

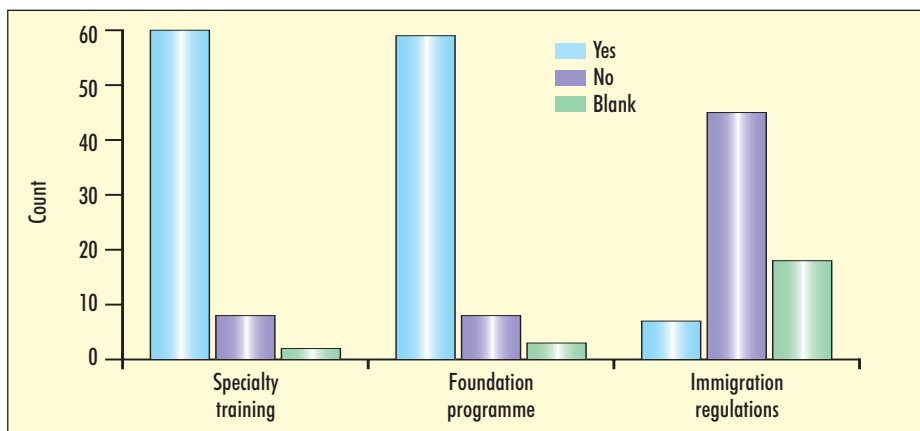


Figure 4. Attendance at workshops.

they felt better informed about MMC. It was disappointing that despite the workshop on MMC and the information available at specialty stands these students felt they still had poor knowledge of changes in postgraduate training.

Workshops

The workshops on run-through and specialty training were very popular, attended by 85% of respondents, whereas the one on immigration rules was less well attended (Figure 4).

Discussion

This study found that the careers fair was valued by the junior doctors and medical students who attended. There were 11 different reasons for attendance at the careers fair, with the commonest reason being to find out more specialty information. This included talking to clinicians about their specialty and finding out about local opportunities in the West Midlands Deanery. One-to-one conversations were much valued, especially tips and advice on how to gain experience relevant to one's first choice specialty. Careers fairs provide the opportunity to gain personally relevant information and help to supplement information gained from websites (such as Royal Colleges and NHS Careers websites), handbooks on medical careers and career management tools such as Windmills (Hawkins, 1999), the 4-step approach (Elton and Reid, 2007) and Sci59 (formerly Sci45) (Gale and Grant, 2001).

Guidance on careers fairs is given in the MMC document on careers management and includes optional workshops and topical debates (Department of Health, 2005). At a time of change in postgraduate medical training, MMC was a concern for many of the attendees, both with regard to foundation programmes and specialty training. These workshops were well attended and appreciated. The BMJ Careers Fairs are quoted as exemplars (Department of Health, 2005). The first such fair was in 2000 and subsequent fairs have expanded so that in 2005 there were 2700 visitors, 80 stands, 43 seminars, a GP event and a skills village (Malik, 2006). Since 2000, there have been some regional BMJ careers fairs but it is unlikely that these will remove the need for deaneries to put on local events, particularly as attendees valued the opportunity to find out about local West Midlands options. There was lower attendance at the workshop on the new immigration rules so at subsequent fairs seminars will be run for smaller numbers of people on less popular but important topics as well as large workshops on topics which are applicable to the majority of attendees.

Many helpful suggestions were made for improving the careers fair (Table 3). Since this study was undertaken links with the three medical schools in the West Midlands Deanery (Birmingham, Warwick and

Table 3. Important factors for planning a successful careers fair

Plan well in advance – 6 months minimum
Carefully choose the venue to ensure available space is appropriate for the size of fair
Choose a date when medical students are not away on electives
Consider running the fair as part of the foundation training programme to increase attendance
Advertise the dates widely to both students, trainees and consultants
Pick topical subjects for workshops and seminars. Consult students and trainees about which topics would be of interest
Use a combination of large and small workshops as not all topics will be applicable to all attendees
Get as many specialties as possible to have a stand at the fair
Ensure that sufficient administrative support is available for the event to register attendees and to collect evaluation forms

Keele) have been strengthened and there is a designated careers lead at each of them. Planning well in advance to ensure maximal attendance by specialty representatives and better advertising were requested. Over 6 months' notice of this year's event has been given. A larger venue is being sought for this year's fair, noting the comment that it was difficult to hear and talk to specialists as the room was so noisy and the request for more seats, especially at the workshops. The need for increased administration support has also been noted; this is important at registration and also for collecting evaluation forms on the careers fair. The invitation to the careers fair will also be extended to third year medical students.

The views expressed by attendees may be a biased collection as fewer than half the total number of attendees handed in a completed questionnaire. Discussions continue about whether to hold careers fairs on a working day or at weekends. A previous careers fair which had been run in Warwick, on a Friday, had been predominantly attended by penultimate year students, as final year students had a special study module and foundation doctors found it diffi-

cult to get time off from their posts. Although this careers fair was attended by both fourth and fifth year students there was still a low attendance by foundation doctors. An alternative would be to build the careers fair into the formal foundation year 1 and year 2 teaching programmes. Encouraging is the fact that all who attended the careers fair would recommend it to colleagues and over 90% would attend it again. As further changes in postgraduate medical education take place in the UK (MMC Inquiry, 2008) it will be important to provide up-to-date guidance for attendees at future careers fairs both on specialty information and training programmes.

Conclusions

There is little written in the literature about careers fairs even though they have been held for a number of years. This study found that the careers fair was valued by both medical students and foundation doctors, in particular the opportunity to obtain information on specialties. One-to-one discussion with specialists was most appreciated, especially tips and advice on gaining experience in the specialty. As medical

training continues to change over the next few years, then careers fairs will remain important fora especially for attendees to gain specialty information and ask their own personalized questions. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

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KEY POINTS

- Careers fairs are valued by both medical students and foundation trainees.
- The commonest reason for attendance at careers fairs is to gain specialty information. One-to-one discussions with clinicians were highly valued.
- Workshops on topical subjects are popular particularly at a time of change in postgraduate recruitment and training.
- Careers fairs need to be planned and advertised well in advance.
- Third year medical students should be invited to careers fairs as well as those in the fourth and fifth years.

Education and training update

The education and training section of the *British Journal of Hospital Medicine* is unique, as it is aimed at all working doctors who are involved in teaching doctors and other health-care professionals, not just those who specialize in medical education. We welcome submissions for this section on educational initiatives and developments in hospital medicine from trainers and trainees.

If you have a suggestion that you would like to discuss in more detail, please contact the editor, Rebecca Linssen, on bjhm@markallengroup.com or telephone 020 7501 6718. Articles should be submitted online at <http://www.epress.ac.uk/bjhm/webforms/author.php>