


Comments on: An Undergraduate Surgery Interest Group: Introducing Premedical Students to the Practice of Surgery [Letter]

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Dear editor

The study conducted by Vakayil et al¹ regarding an undergraduate surgery interest group (USIG) to augment interest in a surgical career was read with great interest. Their findings that the USIG strengthened students understanding and interests in a surgical career is promising as surgical career matriculation and occupancy rates decrease.^{1,2} However, the value of implementing such early educational initiatives remains unknown and it's hard to conclude whether to encourage other institutions to incorporate similar initiatives.

The study did not evaluate whether any of the participants of the USIG actually went on to enrol in a surgical residency programme. Only then would the true value of bolstering interest and tackling the low occupancy rates in surgical residency programmes be proved. It would be interesting to conduct this study over a longer time period and for the authors of the study to follow up on the students' future career paths. This would also help ascertain whether the benefits of the workshops were sustained, and true interest was promoted. The questionnaires conducted were only distributed on two events, this merely shows the efficacy of those two events and not the USIG as a whole. Perhaps conducting the surveys at the beginning and end of the academic year will yield more robust and reliable results regarding the impact of this initiative and the workshops as a whole instead of individual workshops.

In addition, the demographic of the USIG is interesting to note. Surprisingly females made up the majority of the group at 75%. This is in stark contrast to the percentage of female surgeons at only 24%.³ This drop could be due to a lack of female surgical mentors. Furthermore, only 7.14% of students initially did not have an interest in pursuing a career in surgery with over 75% of the students very much interested in surgery. To determine the true benefits of this initiative, it would be interesting to see how the perceptions of those not interested in surgery change over time. Whilst retaining those with an interest in surgery is important, encouraging students who are uncertain or uninterested in surgery is also key.

It's interesting to note that various studies by scholars have shown that preference of students' career specialties remains relatively stable across medical school and does not change much.⁴ Further research is needed to confirm whether preference correlates with final career speciality choice. This finding begs the questions whether such initiatives will help in the grand scheme of the falling number surgeons. Having

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said that, offering the opportunity for surgical mentorship has shown promising results.⁵

To conclude, the study conducted by Vakayil et al touches upon an imperative issue regarding the falling matriculation rates and increasing attrition rates of surgical residency programmes. The study would have benefited from investigating whether students in the USIG entered surgical residency and whether students not initially interested in surgery changed opinion. More research needs to be conducted to fully determine the benefits of such initiatives to undergraduate students.

Disclosure

The authors report no conflicts of interest in this communication.

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