

Attitudes of Parents and Staff towards Medical Students on the Paediatric Wards

Abstract:

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Abstract

This study investigates attitudes of parents and staff to medical students on paediatric wards in a Dublin teaching hospital. We invited 100 parents of patients and 30 staff involved in the care of children on the paediatric wards to participate. The majority of parents agreed or strongly agreed that they would be happy for a student to interview them (n= 87; (87%)), interview their child (80%) or examine their child (74%). Of 30 staff, 12 (40%) staff agreed that the presence of medical students on the ward increased their job satisfaction, 13 (43%) agreed or strongly agreed that medical student presence encouraged them to keep up to date with recent medical developments and 6 (20%) felt that it increased the quality of patient care. Attitudes of both parents and staff to medical students on paediatric wards are positive with both emphasising the need for professional behaviour.

Introduction

Despite substantial allocation of undergraduate student time to history-taking and examination on paediatric wards, the attitudes of parents and staff to this involvement was not researched to date. This contrasts with other specialties and paediatric outpatient settings. Patient attitudes toward medical student have been examined in previous studies^{1,2}. However, research to date has not included paediatric inpatients and studies of staff attitudes have focussed on general practitioners. This study investigates attitudes of staff and parents of paediatric inpatients towards medical students.

Methods

Two questionnaires for completion by parents and staff were prepared based on those used in previous studies of staff and patient attitudes towards medical students^{1,3,6,5}. These were approved by the Trinity College Dublin, Paediatrics Department. Parents of paediatric inpatients and staff involved in caring for paediatric inpatients were invited to participate. Exclusion criteria: parents of children in distress, non-English speaking parents and parents deemed inappropriate by nursing staff. Responses were input to a spreadsheet using an agreed coding pattern. A No preference⁴ was recorded where the respondent noted as such or the answer was left blank. Results were analysed using SPSS. Chi-square test was performed to compare differences between parent and staff opinions.

Results

One-hundred parents of children ranging from 23 days to 15 years (median= 7.5 years) completed the questionnaire. Fifty-four (54%) were male and 55 (55%) had been visited by a student during their stay in hospital. Length of hospital stay ranged from 1 - 16 days (median= 2 days). The questionnaire was completed by 30 staff, of whom 5 (16.7%) were consultants, 10 (33.3%) NCHDs, 4 (13.3%) CNMs, 10 (33.3%) staff nurses and 1 (3.33%) ward clerk. Of 30 staff, 26 (87%) interacted with students at least weekly.

Parent Attitudes towards Students

Most parents agreed or strongly agreed that they would be happy for a student to interview them (n= 87; 87%), interview their child (80%) or examine their child (74%). However, half of staff agreeing or strongly agreeing that parents welcomed the presence of students on the paediatric ward. Of 100 parents, 12 (12%) agreed or strongly agreed that the gender of students was important in allowing them perform history-taking or examination. Of that group, 4 (33%) would prefer a female student, while the remainder expressed no preference. Almost one-third (31%) of parents would prefer students to visit alone, 29% had no preference as to whether students should visit in pairs or singly and 40% would prefer that students visit in pairs, the current policy in the hospital. Only 3 (3%) parents disagreed or strongly disagreed that they would be comfortable to share personal or private information about their child with a student, while over half of parents (59%) would be comfortable to do so.

Staff Attitudes towards Students

Of 30 staff, 12 (40%) staff agreed that the presence of students on the ward increased their job satisfaction, 43% agreed or strongly agreed that students encouraged them to keep up to date with medical developments and 20% felt that it increased the quality of patient care. Half of staff disagreed or strongly disagreed that students get in the way⁴ on the ward, while only one staff member (3%) agreed.

Attitudes towards Student Professionalism

Both parents and staff agreed that a number of professional behaviours by students were important. Ninety-one percent of parents and 100% of staff agreed or strongly agreed that students should introduce themselves by name. Staff were significantly more likely to hold this view (p value = 0.016). There was also agreement or strong agreement from 92% of parents and 100% of staff that students should identify themselves as students, with staff again being significantly more likely to be in strong agreement with this view (p value = 0.020). Staff (93%; n=28) were more likely to agree or strongly agree that how a student dresses is important than parents (46%) (p value <0.001). Interestingly, relatively few staff (37%) or parents (13%) agreed or strongly agreed that students pose an infection control risk. Staff were more likely to agree with this risk than parents (p value <0.001).

There was a strong preference for medical students always to be accompanied by a qualified doctor when interviewing or examining children among both parents and staff: 43% of parents agreed or strongly agreed with this, along with 43% of staff. Parents were more likely than staff to disagree with this statement (p value = 0.040). Most staff (63%) agreed that medical students should be allowed to read medical charts, though 81% of parents also agreed or strongly agreed with this. This difference was not significant (p value = 0.098). Both parents and staff felt that interviewing and examining parents and children contributes to students learning; 96% of parents and 90% of staff agreed or strongly agreed (p value = 0.19).

Discussion

Consistent with previous studies, both parents and staff welcome the presence of students on paediatric wards. Parents were comfortable allowing students to take histories and perform examinations. Both medical and nursing staff noted improvements in their work satisfaction due to the presence of medical students, consistent with research among general practitioners. In contrast to previous studies in obstetrics^{1,2}, student gender was not important to parents. This may relate to the lack of intimate examinations performed by medical students in paediatric rotations. Although a substantial minority of parents would prefer students to attend alone rather than in pairs, this raises child protection issues, therefore, we would not suggest that current college policy advising medical students to examine children in pairs be altered. Many parents and staff felt that students should always be accompanied by a qualified doctor when examining children. This might be ideal for both teaching and for ensuring the well-being of children, however, is not practical in ensuring that students acquire adequate exposure and confidence in paediatrics.

Positively, most parents were happy for students to access medical charts and to discuss personal information with students, contrasting with concerns raised in general practice settings¹¹. This highlights the privileged position which medical students hold and reinforces the importance of confidentiality. The importance of professional behaviour to both parents and staff was highlighted by the emphasis placed on introduction, identification and dress. Reassuringly, students are not viewed as an infection control risk by either group, but must uphold this perception through appropriate hygiene measures.

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