

## Choosing a Career in Psychiatry: Influential Factors Within a Medical School Program

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**Objective:** *To examine the influence of initial interest, pre-clerkship experiences, clerkship experiences, and enrichment activities on choosing a career in psychiatry.*

**Method:** *Residents in psychiatry at the authors' medical school completed a survey that examined each of these factors in relation to career choice.*

**Results:** *Thirty participants ranked initial interest as the most influential factor. Thirteen residents with low initial interest ranked clerkship experiences and negative experiences in other specialties as more influential than the 17 residents with high initial interest. Twelve residents who had attended the authors' medical school rated enrichment activities, particularly psychiatry electives, as more influential than the remaining 18 from other medical schools did.*

**Conclusions:** *Although limited by small sample size and potential recall biases, this study suggests that positive clerkship experiences and participation in psychiatry electives may be modifiable programmatic factors that could enhance recruitment to psychiatry.*

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Recruitment into psychiatry has been suboptimal in the United States (1), Canada (2), and Great Britain (3) for many years. In 2001, only 5% of Canadian medical graduates ranked psychiatry as their first choice, and 14% of the psychiatry residency positions across the country remained vacant (4). Recruitment to psychiatry in the United States in the early 1990s was at its lowest level since 1929 (1). Although an upward trend in recruitment has been noted in the United States recently (5), it is not adequate enough to meet the community psychiatric need; critical shortages exist in certain subspecialties (6).

The two aspects of recruitment to psychiatry that have received the most research attention have been interest in and attitudes toward psychiatry, and medical school experiences conducive to choice of psychiatry as a career. Research into the influences on interest in and attitudes toward psychiatry has shown that interest in biopsychosocial aspects of illness, respect of psychiatry among other specialties, valuing the doctor-patient relationship, appreciating the scientific basis of psychiatry, appreciating the effectiveness of psychiatric therapies, and control of practice hours all may be significant factors (7–10). There is some evidence that women express more interest in psychiatry (11, 12), but some studies have not supported this finding (13).

Research findings on the influence of medical school experiences on choosing psychiatry are inconsistent. Many psychiatrists have advocated increased medical student exposure to psychiatry as a means of enhancing recruitment (2, 13–15), but the ideal nature of that exposure is not entirely clear. For example, Serby et al. (16) found no significant association between the length of psychiatry clerkships and recruitment into psychiatry among 124 U.S. medical schools. Similarly, a large Saudi Arabian survey found no relationship between exposure to psychiatry during training and a positive attitude toward psychiatry (12). On the other hand, in a large German survey, Strebel et

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al. (13) did find a correlation between experience and attitudes toward psychiatry, and Das and Chandrasena (17) found that a positive psychiatry clerkship experience had a positive effect on attitudes. One explanation for these apparently discrepant findings is that the duration of exposure to psychiatry may be less important than the nature of that exposure. Consistent with this hypothesis, Sierles et al. (10) found that among all U.S. medical schools from 1999 to 2001, the best predictor of psychiatry recruitment in a given year was recruitment at that school in the previous year. They concluded that factors intrinsic to the medical training program accounted for recruitment differences. Possible intrinsic factors reported retrospectively by graduates from 114 U.S. medical schools (15) include having a clinical psychiatric elective, observing the psychiatrist-patient relationship, inpatient experiences during the psychiatry clerkship, and observing the ability of psychiatrists to control their practice hours. In one of the few prospective studies in the field, Weintraub et al. (2) found that recruitment to psychiatry increased among students participating in an enriched behavioral science and psychiatry program at the University of Maryland Medical School. This finding remained significant even when controlling for initial interest in psychiatry in the first year of medical school. A second prospective study examined the effect of a weeklong summer program or "institute in psychiatry" for first- and second-year medical students on their subsequent choice of psychiatry as a career. Lofchy et al. (14) demonstrated that between 1996 and 1999, 50% of the institute's attendees entered a psychiatric residency program.

The present study sought to further elucidate program-intrinsic factors that might increase recruitment. We hoped to discern the relative influence on career choice of pre-existing interest in psychiatry, pre-clerkship psychiatry exposure, clerkship psychiatry experiences, and enrichment activities during medical school. The latter activities were specifically created by the recruitment committee of our university department of psychiatry in response to a decline in the number of applicants to the program. This committee formalized attempts of a group of faculty and residents to design programs to attract medical students to psychiatry. Activities included electives in psychiatry, career nights, dinners with psychiatry speakers, summer research scholarships, and the above-mentioned institute. We surveyed psychiatry residents from all years of training in our program ( $N=30$ ) regarding factors that influenced their choice of psychiatry as a specialty. Consistent with the findings of Zinny and Sata (15), we hypothesized that

enrichment activities would be ranked as more influential in career choice among residents reporting a low initial interest in psychiatry at the beginning of medical school than among those reporting high initial interest. Further, we hypothesized that graduates from our medical school (where these activities were more consistently offered than at other schools) would rank such activities as more influential in their career choice, relative to students from other medical schools. We were also interested in determining which specific activity was considered most influential on career choice.

## Method

This was a retrospective study, using a voluntary survey of all Year 1 to 5 psychiatry residents in our program ( $N=125$ ) at one time-point. After obtaining research ethics approval, residents were approached regarding participation via e-mail, to maximize convenience of response. Written informed consent was obtained from all participants. They were assured that survey responses would be confidential and anonymous, and survey completion would take no more than 20 minutes. All participants completed all survey questions.

### Participants

Thirty residents (24%) agreed to participate. Although less than ideal, this participation rate is not unusual for mailed surveys. Sixteen women and 14 men participated, and their average age was 32.41 ( $SD=5.67$ ) years. All 5 years of the residency program were represented, with no significant differences in participation for junior versus senior residents. Twelve residents had attended our medical school, and 18 residents had trained at other medical schools, either within or outside of Canada.

### Measures

To our knowledge, there are no standardized instruments that would allow us to address the hypotheses in question. Therefore, we constructed a survey, based on recent literature regarding factors that determine student choice of a career in psychiatry, that would allow us to address our hypotheses. Demographic characteristics were also elicited. Factors were organized around initial interest, pre-clerkship experience, clerkship experience, and enrichment activities. Questions pertaining to the overall ranking of factors and to the influence of enrichment activities are reported in detail, as these are most relevant to our hypotheses.

## Results

All analyses were completed using the Stastical Package for the Social Sciences, PC version (SPSSPC). Gender differences were sought for all survey questions using serial *t* tests, but none was found. Bivariate correlations were sought between age and all survey questions, but none was found. Similarly, no correlations were found between year of residency and any survey questions. Therefore, effects related to age, gender, and year of residency were not examined in subsequent analyses. To determine whether residents considered enrichment activities at all important in their choice of specialty, they were asked to rate various activities on a Likert scale from 1 (no influence) to 5 (very important influence), provided they had attended the activity. The relevant items were presented in a question that included other possible influences on career choice. The results for enrichment activities are shown in Table 1. On average, these activities were rated at 4.11 (SD=0.68), which corresponded to “quite important influence.”

To determine whether enrichment activities were a key factor in influencing career choice of medical students who initially had a low interest in psychiatry, our first hypothesis, the sample was divided into high and low interest groups using a median split. Then the groups were compared on the question ranking various career choice influences (Table 2) using a Mann-Whitney test for nonparametric group comparisons (M-W *U*). Significant differences were found for initial interest in neuroscience (lower influence for the low interest group; M-W *U* = 58.50, *p*<0.05), clerkship psychiatry experience (higher influence for low interest group; M-W *U* = 29.00, *p*<0.001), income (higher influence for low interest group; M-W *U* = 52.00, *p*<0.05), and negative experiences in other specialties (higher influence for low interest group; M-W *U* = 36.50, *p*<0.01). There were no significant differences for enrichment activities, electives, or other factors, and

clerkship psychiatry experience was ranked as the most influential factor for low interest students. To determine whether enrichment activities were more influential when such activities were consistently available (as in our medical school; second hypothesis), residents trained locally were compared with residents from other medical schools on a question ranking various career choice influences (Table 3). The whole sample rated interest in mental health as the most influential factor in career choice (Kolmogorov-Smirnov (K-S) *Z* = 1.575, *p*<0.05), and resident information days as the least influential factor (K-S *Z* = 1.867, *p*<0.01). Residents trained locally, however, rated psychiatry enrichment activities as more influential than residents from other medical schools, using the Mann-Whitney test for nonparametric group comparisons (M-W *U* = 45.50, *p*<0.05). They also rated psychiatry electives as more influential (M-W *U* = 39.00, *p*<0.01) and resident information days as less influential (M-W *U* = 56.00, *p*<0.05) than residents from other medical schools did. Finally, residents were asked to rank enrichment activities in order of importance (Table 1). A one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov test for nonparametric measures was performed, revealing that psychiatry electives were ranked significantly more important than other enrichment activities (K-S *Z* = 1.750, *p*<0.01). This finding was consistent with the high influence attributed to such electives in the previous question shown in Table 1.

## Discussion

Residents who responded to the survey indicated that psychiatry enrichment activities had been important to them, especially the opportunity to participate in psychiatry electives. Nevertheless, respondents ranked initial interest in mental health as the most important factor in career choice on the whole. Contrary to our first hypothesis, enrichment activities were not ranked as a decisive

**TABLE 1. Influence of Enrichment Activities on Career Choice**

Enrichment Activity	Mean Rating <sup>1</sup>	Mean Ranking <sup>2</sup>
Psychiatry electives (n = 26)	4.58 (0.58)	2.00*
Psychiatry institute (n = 18)	4.56 (0.73)	3.28
Psychiatry dinners (n = 17)	3.77 (0.73)	4.24
Summer research scholarship (n = 12)	4.40 (0.70)	4.17
Psychiatry career night (n = 14)	3.22 (0.67)	5.00

\**p*<0.01 on one-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test  
<sup>1</sup>Rating scale ranged from 0 (did not attend) to 5 (very important influence), with 4 representing an activity considered an “important influence” on career choice  
<sup>2</sup>Rankings from most influential (lowest ranking) to least influential (highest ranking) enrichment activity

factor by respondents with a low initial interest in psychiatry. Instead, clerkship experiences appeared most influential in this group. Interestingly, income considerations and negative experiences in other specialties were also ranked as more influential by those with initial low interest than by those with initial high interest.

These findings confirm that different groups take different paths to a career in psychiatry. Students with high initial interest go on to become psychiatrists, but those with low initial interest may engage in more of a “process of elimination” in choosing their careers. A positive clerkship experience in psychiatry in the presence of negative experiences in other specialties may be particularly influential in this group. This finding suggests that constructing engaging clerkship programs may aid recruitment to psychiatry for some students.

Consistent with our second hypothesis, residents attending our medical school, where enrichment activities were consistently available, rated these activities as more influential in choosing their careers than residents from other medical schools did. This was found both for psychiatry electives and for other enrichment activities provided. The latter activities may also improve the visibility of psychiatry among medical students throughout their training, making it more likely to be considered as a possible career option at decisive times (e.g., during clerkship). The finding that students valued psychiatry electives was consistent across several survey questions and stood out in the overall ranking as the most highly ranked factor apart from initial interest. Identifying elective experiences that are particularly likely to determine career choice, therefore, seems a worthwhile goal. The two program-intrinsic factors that

**TABLE 2. Rankings of Factors Influencing Career Choice by Initial Interest Level<sup>1</sup>**

Item	Sample (N = 30)	High Interest (N = 17)	Low Interest (N = 13)
Interest in mental health	2.44 (2.03)*	2.18 (1.51)	2.77 (2.46)
Interest in neuroscience	4.07 (2.67)	3.47 (2.43)	5.42 (2.71)*
Pre-clerkship activities	8.46 (3.17)	8.47 (3.18)	8.90 (3.45)
Clerkship psychiatry course	6.37 (3.46)	7.71 (3.18)	3.75 (2.60)***
Psychiatry enrichment activities	7.63 (3.59)	7.29 (2.91)	8.20 (4.64)
Psychiatry electives	4.23 (3.47)	4.06 (3.34)	4.08 (3.63)
Mentor in psychiatry	5.81 (3.34)	5.81 (3.27)	4.77 (3.70)
Lifestyle	4.81 (2.68)	5.12 (2.74)	3.92 (2.58)
Income	9.58 (2.19)	10.19 (1.64)	8.25 (2.96)*
Negative experiences in other specialties	7.81 (3.68)	9.25 (2.86)	5.17 (3.56)**
Research possibilities	6.85 (3.02)	6.00 (3.12)	7.54 (3.38)
Resident information day	10.58 (3.36)**	11.06 (2.74)	10.09 (4.11)

\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01, \*\*\*p<0.001; Whole Sample: One-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test; Group Comparisons: Mann-Whitney Test  
<sup>1</sup> Rankings from most influential (lowest ranking) to least influential (highest ranking) factor

**TABLE 3. Rankings of Factors Influencing Career Choice by Medical School**

Item	Sample (N = 30)	Local School (N = 12)	Other (N = 18)
Interest in mental health	2.44 (2.03)*	2.67 (1.56)	2.28 (2.22)
Interest in neuroscience	4.07 (2.67)	4.92 (2.94)	3.82 (2.48)
Pre-clerkship activities	8.46 (3.17)	8.92 (2.94)	8.40 (3.52)
Clerkship Psychiatry course	6.37 (3.46)	5.33 (3.11)	6.59 (3.78)
Psychiatry Enrichment activities	7.63 (3.59)	5.92 (3.70)	9.00 (2.93)*
Psychiatry Electives	4.23 (3.47)	2.17 (1.19)	5.50 (3.83)**
Mentor in Psychiatry	5.81 (3.34)	5.17 (3.22)	5.47 (3.69)
Lifestyle	4.81 (2.68)	5.42 (3.00)	4.06 (2.38)
Income	9.58 (2.19)	10.33 (2.23)	8.63 (2.42)
Negative experiences in other specialties	7.81 (3.68)	8.17 (3.79)	7.00 (3.74)
Research possibilities	6.85 (3.02)	6.58 (3.00)	6.76 (3.55)
Resident information day	10.58 (3.36)**	12.08 (1.38)	9.53 (4.00)*

\*p<0.05, \*\*p<0.01; Whole Sample: One-sample Kolmogorov-Smirnov Test; Group Comparisons: Mann-Whitney Test

were considered most influential by respondents to our survey (psychiatry electives and psychiatry clerkship) were also identified by Zimny and Sata in their large study of U.S. medical schools (15). Interestingly, both of these factors involve a high degree of contact with clinicians and patients in the field. By contrast, some of the less direct enrichment activities (e.g., dinners with psychiatry speakers, career nights) were rated as less influential in our survey. Though such activities undoubtedly provide students with interesting information about psychiatry and improve psychiatry's visibility, direct experience of the specialty may be more likely to affect career decisions.

The results of our study are clearly limited by small sample size and by studying only members of a single residency program. The modest rate of survey response (24%) also raises questions about whether the findings are generalizable. As in all retrospective studies, there may be recall biases. Further prospective studies are needed to avoid such biases. Future studies should also include subjects who chose *not* to specialize in psychiatry, in order to elucidate factors that may deter medical students from this career choice. Despite these limitations, study findings may be of interest to educators and program planners seeking to recruit medical students to psychiatry in order to address the continuing shortage of specialists in this field. Consistent with many previous studies (7–10), initial interest appeared to be an important factor in choosing psychiatry. More relevant to program planners, however, positive clerkship and elective experiences appeared to increase the appeal of psychiatry for some students.

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