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The Changing Health Care Environment is Affecting the Specialty Selection of Students and Residents

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The Changing Health Care Environment is Affecting the Specialty Selection of Students and Residents

Few doctors would dispute the fact that medicine is currently undergoing dramatic changes as market forces increasingly impact the medical field.(1) Specialties that once rewarded doctors with very good incomes and secure employment are now offering less security.(2) In the Department of Family Medicine, we are studying how these changes are affecting both residents and students. Many students and residents are beginning their careers with very large debt loads and must be careful to select careers that can ensure adequate compensation and guaranteed employment.(3)

In 1995, surveys were mailed to 229 senior medical students at Thomas Jefferson University. Forty seven percent of the respondents felt that recent changes in the health care environment had affected their specialty choice--yet, only 12 percent of the students reported they had altered their original specialty preferences because of these changes. Among the students planning a career in general internal medicine, 63 percent felt that their choices had been influenced by the increasing emphasis on primary care. It appears that many of the students who are now selecting general internal medicine would in the past have selected an internal medicine *subspecialty.*

In the summer of 1996, questionnaires were sent to 256 residents at Jefferson and 5 affiliates surveying them about their concerns with future employment. The response rate was 57 percent. Among medical subspecialists, 32 percent felt that residents finishing their programs were having trouble finding the type of employment they desired. The percentages of residents having trouble finding the type of employment that they wanted were significantly less among the primary care specialties surveyed. Among family practice, internal medicine, and pediatric residents, the percentages were 0 percent, 9 percent, and 0 percent, respectively. Ninety-one percent of the residents in subspecialty internal medicine had concerns about finding suitable employment for themselves upon completion of their residency. For residents in family medicine, general internal medicine, and pediatrics, the percentages having such concerned about future employment then those in subspecialties. When asked about their happiness with their residency selection most residents were happy with their selection. Unhappiness was found among family practice residents, general internal medicine residents, pediatric residents, and subspecialty internal medicine residents in the following percentages, respectively: 27 percent, 11 percent, 14 percent, and 23 percent. These differences were not statistically significant.

It appears that economic realities in the health care industry are causing concerns among students and residents, particularly those selecting the medical subspecialties. The rising level of debt among many students and residents is forcing them to be acutely aware of job opportunities in their chosen specialty. We expect that these trends will continue as the changes in health care delivery gain momentum. Faculty members at Thomas Jefferson University should be aware of the growing concerns about employment opportunities among both students and residents. We must help the students and residents navigate through these increasingly complex times and be cognizant of the new stresses that students and residents are experiencing.

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