

SOME ANSWERS FROM ASSESSMENT

VOCATIONAL training for general practice is now rapidly establishing itself as the normal method of entry to this branch of the profession. With over 1,000 trainees already in post, and numbers steadily increasing, it is clear that the Government, the profession, and the trainees themselves now regard this as the proper way to prepare for unsupervised medical practice in the community.

Cynics, however, have for several years been questioning whether vocational training works. What is the evidence, they ask, that doctors benefit from training? How do we know that this very expensive process is really worth it? There is no doubt that it is expensive. With senior house officers earning more than ever before—and this is the grade in which training normally takes place—the Government is spending over two million pounds a year on vocational training for general practice.

We are therefore particularly pleased to publish today number 17 in our *Reports from General Practice* series, which describes the results of a research study carried out by Freeman and Byrne, from the Department of General Practice at the University of Manchester. This project is the biggest and most carefully controlled measurement of the changes occurring in vocational trainees during their course of preparation so far published. Thanks to immense co-operation from the trainees themselves, who voluntarily submitted to a large battery of tests, evidence has at last appeared showing that vocational training actually works.

Main findings

First of all, Freeman and Byrne have shown that there was a statistically significant increase in the average scores of trainees in clinical knowledge during the three-year course. Trainees are not inferior to trainers, even at the beginning of their course, in factual knowledge, but are substantially behind in problem-solving skills.

One of the most fascinating conclusions is that it is in personality that some of the greatest changes are found, and then predominantly among the weaker trainees. By using progressive rating scores, Freeman and Byrne have found that the weaker trainees, who had a rigid and authoritarian approach at the start of their course, tended to move during training towards the characteristics of the better trainees and became more flexible and tolerant. Similarly, in post-score tests of skill (measured by modified essay questions), once again the 15 worst trainees approximated towards the 15 best, but the increase for the poorest was significantly greater than the increase for the best.

Such findings represent important evidence in favour of group work and underline what a growing number of organisers and trainees have been finding out for themselves, that a small group of peers provides a particularly potent learning situation.

Fortunately, the views of the trainees themselves were sought and recorded. They found they liked group work and the majority asked specifically “to be separated, year by year, in such work”. Another majority opinion was “that there was too much time spent in hospital attachment”, which may well be a possible pointer to the future.

We also publish today an entirely different approach, by Howie and Dingwall-Fordyce, from another Department of General Practice, at Aberdeen. They have used simulated consultations with patients to assess trainees and have also found that “the trainees as a group closely approach the behaviour—in the defined terms of the study—of principals. The trend was more marked for doctors on a three-year training programme than for those on a one-year programme”—which could be important evidence for the advantage of three-year courses (*Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners* 1976).

Thus it appears that the educational centres which have focused attention chiefly on the process of education for general practice have been particularly concerned with assessment. Methods of assessment are being increasingly refined, and although many scheme organisers may be frightened by the complexity of the Manchester model and the battery of the tests used, it is quite probable that many fewer tests could be used with success on ordinary vocational training courses. There is certainly scope for further research.

The advantage of assessment is that it provides confirmation, both for the learner and the teacher, that learning has taken place and comfort for the sponsors, whether Government or university, that the educational process is being treated objectively and value for money being obtained.

The Assessment of Vocational Training for General Practice is a document of considerable importance. The authors are to be congratulated on obtaining for the first time ever some important answers from assessment.

REFERENCES

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