

Too old to teach?

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SUMMARY. The scores obtained by 71 general-practitioner trainers on a 100-question multiple choice question paper were analyzed in relation to the number of years since the trainer qualified. No evidence was found that older trainers had poorer recall of clinical facts.

IT is often suggested that trainers involved in vocational training schemes for general practice have less clinical factual knowledge than their more recently qualified colleagues. With the relative isolation of general practice in the past, and with the passage of time from qualification and from working in a hospital environment, it would be only too easy to assume that this statement is correct. What is the evidence?

Method

Recently, 71 trainers in general practice in the West Midlands completed a 100-question, multiple choice question paper, which included questions on medicine, paediatrics, psychiatry, community medicine, surgical

© *Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners*, 1977, 27, 361-362.

diagnosis, therapeutics, obstetrics and gynaecology, infectious diseases, ENT, ophthalmology and dermatology. The questions used were in the form of one correct answer out of five choices. One mark was awarded for the correct answer and no marks for any other answer. There was no negative marking.

The test was held in December 1976 under standard conditions with all the trainers in the same room and with a time limit of one and a quarter hours. I was present throughout and distributed and collected all the papers.

Results

Table 1 shows the distribution of the trainers against the number of years that they had been qualified.

Table 2 shows the distribution of the trainers against the range of marks scored in the MCQ. The mean was 58, with a standard deviation of eight.

A scatterplot was constructed (Figure 1), plotting the number of marks scored in the MCQ against the number of years the trainers had been qualified, to assess the degree of association (correlation) that there might be between them.

The highly disordered appearance of the graph suggests that there is little or no correlation between the

Table 1. Years after qualification.

Years after qualification	Under 4	5-9	10-14	15-19	20-24	25-29	30-34	35-39
Number of trainers	0	2	13	15	16	11	9	5

Table 2. Marks scored in multiple choice questions.

Number of marks	40-44	45-49	50-54	55-59	60-64	65-69	70-74
Number of trainers	3	10	12	12	20	11	3



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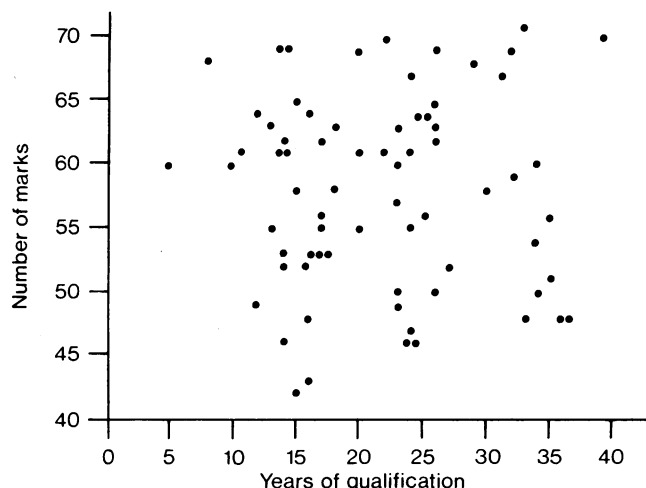


Figure 1. Scatterplot showing no correlation between the number of marks scored and the number of years trainers had been qualified.

variates. The coefficient of correlation was computed and found to be -0.018 which is very near to a perfect zero correlation, and confirms that there is no linear correlation between the two variates.

Discussion

It appears that the longer qualified trainers are no better or worse than their more recently qualified colleagues in an objective test of clinical factual knowledge.

It is encouraging to find that some longer qualified trainers have demonstrated that they have a high degree of factual knowledge, and are not too old to teach some of their younger colleagues clinical facts.

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the 71 trainers for completing the MCQ; Dr D. G. Scott, Regional Adviser in General Practice; and Mrs Hunt, West Midlands Regional Hospital Authority for secretarial assistance.

Clinical Freedom

Clinical freedom is a precious concept which doctors are right to fight for. They cannot maintain it by ignoring their responsibilities. George Bernard Shaw wrote "Freedom incurs responsibility, that is why so many men fear it!"

Reference

Owen, D. (1976). Speech as Minister of State, Department of Health and Social Security. April.