
STUDENT PROJECTS

Anglo-German contrasts in general practice

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SUMMARY. Forty German primary care physicians and 40 British general practitioners were asked about their knowledge and attitude about each other, and whether they had worked in the other country. The answers showed much ignorance and prejudice and indicate that there are big differences in medical practice between the two groups.

Introduction

PORTER and Porter (1980) have contrasted medical practice in France and England and have shown mutual ignorance and prejudice between the two professions (Porter, 1980). The purpose of this pilot study was to make a similar comparison between the British NHS system and the German insurance system.

Method

I had the opportunity to carry out this study while attached to the Department of Community Medicine, St Thomas's Hospital, for two months during 1981. I designed a questionnaire to examine the knowledge and attitude of German and British doctors about each other. The questionnaire included questions about the doctors' work, their own practice and the means they used to keep up to date.

Forty British and 40 German general practitioners were approached either by post or directly. Completed questionnaires were eventually obtained for 33 British and 29 German doctors. Doctors involved in teaching and research were over-represented in the two groups. The groups were highly selected, and many doctors were personally known to me or my friends.

Results

Knowledge, language and contacts

Twenty-four out of 29 German doctors had learnt English at school; 18 still talked some English. Nine out

of 33 British doctors had learnt German, and only one still had some knowledge of the language. Fifteen of the German doctors knew at least one British medical journal: eight mentioned *The Lancet* and three knew *The Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners*. Only one British doctor knew the name of a German one. Eight German doctors were able to name at least one British teaching hospital, but only four British doctors knew a German one. Eight German doctors had had a contact with a British general practitioner; six British doctors had met a German primary care physician.

Attitudes

Fourteen British doctors and three German doctors said that they did not know enough about the other system to make a sensible comment.

Fourteen German doctors thought that primary care in England was as good as in Germany but none thought it better. Fourteen British doctors thought that there was no difference between the two countries, but two thought that German medical standards were better than British. A minority of doctors in each group thought that the other system gave better value for money (German five and British two). None of the German doctors thought the British doctors too wealthy for the job they do but six British doctors so regarded the German doctors.

Investigations

The German doctors on average did more investigations than the British (41 blood tests per week compared with 12, and 12 radiographs per week compared with eight). Half the German doctors believed that they had better diagnostic facilities.

Prescribing

Most German and British doctors thought that there was no difference in prescribing habits, but seven out of 22 German doctors thought the British prescribed fewer suppositories and injections and a majority of British doctors suspected that the Germans prescribed more tonics, injections and suppositories.

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Further education

Seven of the British doctors and five of the German thought that the British doctors had better access to libraries and postgraduate lectures than the German doctors. There was little difference in the mean of the number of lectures attended in the past two months (German three and British five). The British doctors were more disparaging about the role of drug company literature. Nineteen thought it 'not important at all', compared with three German doctors.

Miscellaneous

Each group tended to think that the other was the more authoritarian in its approach to patients (German nine out of 24, British 13 out of 20). Whilst 21 out of 27 German doctors wore a white coat, only one British doctor wore one. Most from each group agreed that British general practice is less competitive than German practice (21 German doctors, 19 British doctors). Twenty German doctors thought that British patients do not have freedom of choice of doctors.

Discussion

It has been shown that British and French doctors are isolated and ignorant about each other, and this small study shows that a similar situation seems to exist between British and German doctors. The opinions that each group of doctors has about the other, though exaggerated, often have a foundation in fact. For example, this study and other investigations (Fleming and Maes, 1980) confirm the opinion that British doctors have that they do fewer investigations than Continental doctors do. There must be much we can learn from each other and there is now, in theory, freedom of movement of doctors within the EEC. There is a need for detailed comparative studies of the different medical systems operating within the EEC. I hope that this pilot study will indicate areas which can be usefully investigated further.

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