

facilities made available for students to develop their own assignments through the Internet.

The programme delivers short periods of intense interactive study in the time and place of the learners choosing. The overall philosophy is to develop thinking skills rather than pure knowledge. It develops not only the traditional empirical arm of scientific thinking, but also the Hermeneutic or Interpretative side essential to the 'art' of general practice.⁵ It is a programme run by practitioners, for practitioners.

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Periconceptual folate supplementation

Sir,
Phull & Hirst (December *Journal*, p.688) highlighted some of the barriers to improving uptake of the recommendation for periconceptual folate supplementation.¹ The Medical Research Council concluded that folic acid taken periconceptually reduced the risk of recurrence of neural tube defects by 72%.² Recent data indicate that first occurrences can be reduced and other benefits have also been recorded.^{3,4} Reducing the number of babies conceived with development abnormalities will improve both child and maternal health.

We developed an interest in the low uptake of this health policy and found a lack of research evidence in this area. Studies in secondary care suggest low levels of awareness,⁵ but work planning interventions in primary care or assessing haematological values in the first

trimester is lacking.

The Department of Health has commissioned the Health Education Authority to lead a campaign to increase periconceptual intake of folates and folic acid.⁶

The West Midlands NHS Executive R&D Programme are funding us to assess the impact of this national campaign. Women's awareness of the recommendation and their serum and red blood cell folate will be assessed at the outset of this campaign. We aim to study 1200 women in the first trimester of pregnancy with non-pregnant women of child bearing age as controls. The study will be repeated after the campaign to assess how awareness and haematological values have changed.

This research will provide baseline data in this important area of periconceptual care and also information about the impact of a national multi-media health promotion campaign.

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Crisis in recruitment

Sir,
Course organizers have been warning of a

crisis in recruitment of general practice registrars for some time. Many reasons have been suggested for this decline in the popularity of general practice as a career but no firm opinions have been made. Course organizers in Yorkshire decided to ask fifth-year medical students of Leeds University and pre-registration house officers (PRHOs) in Yorkshire what influenced their choice of a career within medicine in order to use this information to promote general practice as a career option.

The study was carried out between August 1994 and February 1995. One hundred and ninety-two PRHOs and 103 fifth-year medical students returned the questionnaire, which asked for basic demographic data and whether the respondent had made a career choice, if general practice had been considered, and why or why not. Sixty-two per cent of PRHOs and 58% of students had made a career choice, the most popular speciality being general practice in both groups: 19% of PRHOs and 14.5% of students. Some 63.2% of PRHOs and 72% of students had considered general practice. Many had enjoyed their GP attachment in medical school, others saw it as a preference to the competitive world of hospital medicine. General practice was seen as offering variety, better hours and the ability to work in the community. The reasons for rejection included lack of intellectual stimulation, terrible hours and having to see a lot of non-ill patients.

A major factor in the choice of career appeared to be the enjoyment or otherwise of the GP attachment as a student, and the influence of other doctors during training. The suggestion that part of the pre-registration year should be spent in general practice is a positive step.¹ Many respondents complained of a lack of formal career advice.

There were few comments about political issues. Only one person mentioned the 24 commitment and one fundholding. The proposed introduction of summative assessment did not appear to be influencing this group.

While this study addresses the reasons for choosing or rejecting general practice, it does not answer the question as to why fewer doctors are choosing general practice now. The answers given could apply to the profession 5 years ago as to now. The future of general practice is bleak unless we can attract high-calibre recruits. More work needs to be done in this area.

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