

## Out of Hours

# The potential of student-led initiatives to revitalise general practice

### AN URGENT NEED TO ENGAGE AND INSPIRE POTENTIAL GP CANDIDATES

If we look at the figures, the future of general practice in the UK seems bleak. Application numbers continue to fall and training posts go unfilled year after year.<sup>1,2</sup> Although £10 million is promised to 'recruit and retain' GPs, the joint plan by the British Medical Association, Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP), and NHS England focuses on doctors, making no mention of medical students.<sup>3</sup> If we are truly to rebuild the GP workforce we must engage and inspire potential candidates as early as possible; that is, at the medical student level.

We are not the first area of medicine to experience a recruitment crisis and we can learn from those that have faced similar issues. For decades, academic medicine in the UK suffered declining numbers. However, innovative approaches have started to turn the tide and the UK has seen an increase of 8% in the clinical academic workforce since 2006.<sup>4</sup> The importance of engaging and inspiring students at an early level was acknowledged as crucial to reversing the decline in academic medicine.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, it was recognised that medical students could play an active role in reversing the decline.<sup>6</sup>

### FOLLOWING THE LEAD OF THE NATIONAL STUDENT ASSOCIATION OF MEDICAL RESEARCH

In 2012, the Wellcome Trust funded the establishment of the student-led National Student Association of Medical Research (NSAMR).<sup>6</sup> The NSAMR, tasked with encouraging and supporting students to pursue a career in academic medicine, increased the number of medical student research societies in the UK from five to 32 within 2 years.<sup>7</sup> They coordinate events and initiatives throughout the country including talks from inspiring speakers,

careers events, journal clubs, mentoring programmes, and school outreach programmes. Students gather annually for a national conference. The emphasis is on innovation and on enabling students who have a passion for research to share it with their peers.

Such student-led initiatives have key benefits. They are remarkably cheap as there are no salaries to pay, and students volunteer because they wish to increase their knowledge and skills, and share their interest with others. The students who lead such societies are in a unique position to understand why other students may find a specialty unappealing, and what may convince them otherwise. Students can be remarkably innovative and enthusiastic, and, if properly supported, student-led initiatives can harness this energy to great effect.

### ESTABLISHING A NATIONAL NETWORK OF STUDENT GP SOCIETIES

A Google search reveals information on 11 student GP/primary care societies, although more may exist. I propose that a national network of student GP societies be established to support existing societies and aid the set-up of new societies at medical schools across the UK. Such an organisation could run local and national events, including talks and conferences, use social media to provide topical GP-related information, run competitions, and develop other innovative approaches aimed at inspiring students with general practice. However, a national student GP organisation would need support.

The NSAMR is supported financially by the Wellcome Trust and boasts some of medical science's leading figures amongst its patrons. The RCGP is perhaps best fitted to provide financial support, and I believe that GP leaders throughout the country would be happy to lend their experience and provide guidance.

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No single approach will be able to reverse the decline in GP numbers. However, in developing a strategy to tackle the decline we should not overlook the role that adequately supported student groups could play in revitalising general practice.

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