



MEDICAL EDUCATION
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Medical Education Scholarship Forum Proceedings

Should I apply for medical school? A look into how rural students perceive barriers

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Purpose: The growing demand for rural physicians in Newfoundland and Labrador has prompted the initiative to recruit medical students from rural and remote areas of the province. Research has suggested that previous exposure to rural areas may impact the decision for medical graduates to practice in rural settings. However, there may be deterring factors associated with applying to medical school that are directly or indirectly related to the geographic area in which the student grows up. This study aims to identify whether or not rural students perceive greater barriers to applying for medical school than urban students. **Methods:** First-year medical students visited high schools to educate students about careers in medicine. Following the session each high school student was provided the opportunity to give written feedback regarding their thoughts about medical school. Multiple choice questions were entered into SPSS Version 22 for analysis. Responses to open-ended questions were entered into the qualitative software program NVivo10 to organize the data by nodes. The frequency of each node was examined to help detect patterns in the data and guide strength of themes. Students were grouped by provincial regions for comparison of feedback between rural and urban areas. **Results:** Twenty-seven (27) schools in three provinces received presentations, yielding 415 student feedback forms. Respondents were a mean age of 15 (± 0.93). Preliminary analysis indicated that about half (51.4%) of the students from all regions agreed that medicine was promoted in their high school. Fifty-two per cent (52%) of respondents felt that rural students were more likely to think that medicine is an unrealistic career choice when compared to urban students; however, only 30% felt that barriers to pursuing medicine were directly related to being a rural student. Qualitative feedback indicated that limited opportunity to pursue advanced education, distance, and finances were barriers specific to students in rural areas. Over half (52%) of the respondents felt that the presentations increased their interest in medicine. **Conclusions:** Early results suggest that geography alone is not a barrier for rural students who are interested in medical school. Findings from this study could be important in optimizing the number of applicants from rural areas.