



Research Article

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Family Medicine Through the Eyes of Final Year Medical Students; A University Example in South of Turkey Tıp Fakültesi Son Sınıf Öğrencilerinin Gözüyle Aile Hekimliği: Türkiye'nin Güneyinde Bir Üniversite Örneği

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Öz

Amaç: Türkiye'nin de dahil birçok ülkede birinci basamakta kariyer yapmayı düşünen öğrenci sayısı az olmakla birlikte, birinci basamak hekimine duyulan ihtiyaç artmaktadır. Türkiye'de bu konuda yapılan çalışmalar sınırlıdır. Bu çalışmanın amacı, öğrencilerin aile hekimliği hakkındaki bilgi ve tutumlarını değerlendirmek ve aile hekimliği uzmanlığı tercihi ile düşüncelerini incelemektir.

Materyal ve Metot: Tanımlayıcı kesitsel çalışma 2020 Kasım ayında yapılmıştır. Veriler çevrimiçi bir anket yoluyla toplanmıştır

Bulgular: Toplam 225 öğrenci anketi tamamladı (Cevap oranı: %82,72; kadın oranı: % 58,66; ortalama yaş: % 24,43 yıl). Uzmanlık eğitimi yapmadan pratisyen aile hekimi olarak çalışmayı isteyenler %17,77 (n=40), geçici bir süre pratisyen aile hekimi olarak çalışabileceğini belirtenler %49,33 (n=111) olarak bulundu. Aile hekimliği uzmanlığını kariyer tercihleri arasında planlayanların oranı %27,55 (n=62) olarak saptandı. Öğrencilerin büyük çoğunluğu aile hekimlerinin iş-yaşam dengesinin diğer hekimlere göre daha iyi olduğunu (%92,88), aile hekimliğinin tedavinin yanında hastalıktan korunmaya da odaklandığını (%92), aile hekimliğinde uzun süreli hekim hasta ilişkisi olduğunu (%88,00), aile hekimliğinin tıbbı önemli katkı sağladığını (%85,77) onayladı. "Aile hekimliğindeki sağlık hizmetleri diğer uzmanlık alanları kadar heyecan vericidir" (%16,44) ve "aile hekimlerine toplumda gereken saygı gösterilir" (%27,55) ez az onaylanan ifadelerdi. "Aile hekimleri diğer uzmanlardan daha az kazanır", "aile hekimliği teşhis açısından zordur" en yaygın kararsız kalınan ifadeler olarak saptandı.

Sonuç: Öğrencilerin büyük çoğunluğunun aile hekimliğini koruyucu hekimlik, uzun süreli hekim hasta ilişkisi ve tıbbı önemli katkı sağlama özelliklerini bilmesine rağmen üçte birinden daha azının aile hekimliği uzmanlığına ilgisi olduğu bulundu. Aile hekimliğindeki sağlık hizmetlerinin heyecan verici olmadığı ve toplumda gereken saygı gösterilmemesi en yaygın olumsuz düşüncelerdi.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Aile hekimliği, tıp öğrencileri, kariyer tercihi, bilgi, tutum.

Abstract

Objectives: In many countries, including Turkey, the number of students considering a career in primary care is low, although the need for primary physicians increases. Studies on this subject in Turkey are scarce. The aim of this study was to evaluate students' knowledge and attitudes about family medicine (FM) and to examine their intentions to enter the FM specialty.

Materials and Methods: The descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted in November 2020. The data was collected via an online questionnaire.

Results: A total of the 225 students (response rate: 82.72%; female rate: 58.66%; mean age: 24.43 years) completed the survey. It was found that 27.55% (26 males, 36 females) of the students would include FM specialty among their specialty preferences. The most important factors for the specialization choice of these students were comfort/work-life balance and personal interest. There was no significant relationship between gender, income, place of residence, and preferring FM specialty ($p > 0.05$). The majority of students approved that the work-life balance of family physicians was better than that of other physicians (92.88%), that FM had protective properties besides treatment (92.00%), that long-term physician-patient relationship (88.00%). "FM is as exciting as other specialties" (16.44%) and "family physicians are given the necessary respect in society" (27.55%) were the least approved statements.

Conclusion: Less than a third of students were found to have an interest in an FM specialty. The most common negative thoughts about FM are that FM is not exciting and is not properly respected in society.

Keywords: Family medicine, medical students; career choice; knowledge, attitude.

Introduction

In the 21st century, the increasing burden of chronic diseases and the need to strengthen primary health care services arising from the changing nature of diseases have revealed the importance of developing the family medicine (FM) program as a strategy.¹ With its feature of providing appropriate healthcare services to individuals without discriminating between age, gender, or disease, FM constitutes the cornerstone of the healthcare system.² It has been documented that healthcare systems where strong primary health care services are provided have better population health by ensuring equality, decreasing costs, and increasing service quality.^{3,4}

Primary care physicians meet the basic needs of a country's healthcare infrastructure.⁵ However, in many countries, including Turkey, the number of students considering a career in primary care is low, although the need for primary physicians increases.^{6,7} According to current trends, it is estimated that there will be a shortage of 52,000 primary care physicians in the United States (US) by 2025.⁸ However, it has been reported that less than 20% of medical faculty graduates in the US will choose a career in primary care.⁹ The problem of the workforce in primary care is not only a problem in the US, but the rate of family physicians/practitioners in many countries, including Oman, Canada, and France, is decreasing or already low.¹⁰ In a study conducted in Turkey, it was reported that FM specialty was not included in the career options of medical students, and they considered it as an uninteresting branch of medicine.¹¹

Although FM specialty education has been provided in Turkey since 1985, certified practitioners who have not received specialty education in primary care can work as family physicians.⁶ According to the 2018 data of the Ministry of Health, a total of 24,082 family physicians, works in Turkey, including 1814 specialists and 22,268 practitioners. The number of family physicians is 15.7% of the total number of physicians (153,128), and the average population per family physician is 3,124.¹² However, the Ministry of Health has aimed for the average population of a family physician to be 2,000 by 2023.¹³ This indicates that there is a need for more family physicians in Turkey.

In Turkey, studies evaluating medical students' preferences for FM as a career and their knowledge and attitudes about FM are limited. The aim of this study was to evaluate students' knowledge and attitudes about FM and to examine their intentions to enter the FM specialty.

Materials and Methods

Study population and design

This descriptive cross-sectional study was conducted between November 1 and December 1, 2020 at Gaziantep University Faculty of Medicine. The target population was all students in the 6th year (272 students). A web-based questionnaire was prepared using Google forms. The link to the questionnaire was also shared with groups of all 6th year students on WhatsApp Messenger.

Questionnaire

The questionnaire consisted of two parts. In the first part, the students' socio-demographic characteristics, career preferences, and their desire to work as a family physician in the future were questioned. In the second part of the survey form, knowledge and attitudes about FM were evaluated with 12 questions scored on a five-point likert-type scale. These questions were taken from the survey used in another study and were translated into Turkish.¹⁴

Statistical Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences software (SPSS), version 22.0 (IBM Inc., Chicago, IL, USA). Mean and standard deviation, number, and percentage values were used for descriptive statistics, and the chi-square test was used to compare analytically expressed data. $P < 0.05$ was considered statistically significant.

Results

A total of 225 students completed the survey (response rate is 82.72%). The average age of students was 24.43 ± 1.16 (range 22-28), and 132 (58.66%) of them were women. Those who wanted to work as a practicing family physician without specializing have been 17.77% (n=40) and 49.33% (n=111) who stated that they could work as a practicing family physician temporarily. The most desired specialties were 48.44% (n=109) surgical sciences, 45.33% (n=102) internal sciences, 2.22% (n=5) basic sciences.

It was found that 27.55% (26 males, 36 females) of the students would include FM specialty among their specialty preferences. There was no significant relationship between gender, income, place of residence, and preferring FM specialty. It was determined that the most important factors in the choice of specialty in medicine were personal interest (n=74, 32.88%) and comfort/work-life balance (n=67, 29.77%). It was found that

51.61% (n=32) of the students who stated that they would prefer FM specialization stated comfort/work-life balance as the most important factor, and 20.96% (n=13) stated personal interest. The socio-demographic characteristics and career preferences of the students are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. The socio-demographic characteristics and career preferences of the students

	n	%
Gender		
Male	93	41.33
Female	132	58.66
The most common place of residence		
Village or District	32	14.22
City center	193	85.77
Income status		
Low	22	9.77
Middle	159	70.66
High	44	19.55
Willingness to work as a family physician without specializing		
Yes	40	17.77
No	74	32.88
Temporarily	111	49.33
Preference of family medicine specialty		
Yes	62	27.55
No	101	44.88
Undecided	62	27.55
The most desired area of specialization		
Internal sciences	102	45.33
Surgical sciences	109	48.44
Basic medical sciences	5	2.22
Does not want to specialize	9	4.00
The most important factor for your specialty choice		
Personal interest	74	32.88
Financial gain	20	8.88
Comfort/work-life balance	67	29.77
Prestige	8	3.55
Being beneficial to people	23	10.22
Having an academic career	14	6.22
Influence of family members and friends	2	0.88

59.11% of the students confirmed that more family physicians are needed in Turkey, 85.77% that FM contributes significantly to medicine, 92.00% that FM focuses on prevention of disease as well as treatment, 88.00% that there is a long-term physician-patient relationship in FM, 72.44% that education in other

specialties is more difficult, and 92.88% that family physicians have a better work-life balance than other physicians. It was found that 16.44% of the students thought that healthcare services in FM are as exciting as other specialties and 27.55% of them thought that family physicians are respected by society. The statements that students were most undecided about were “family physicians earn less than other specialists”, “FM is difficult in terms of diagnosis” (Table 2).

Table 2. Students’ knowledge and attitudes regarding family medicine

	Strongly agree/agree n (%)	Undecided n (%)	Disagree / strongly disagree n (%)
There is a need for more family physicians in Turkey.	133 (59.11)	54 (24.00)	38 (16.88)
Healthcare services in family medicine contribute significantly to medicine	193 (85.77)	18 (8.00)	14 (6.22)
Family medicine is difficult in terms of diagnosis.	110 (48.88)	71 (31.55)	44 (19.55)
Family physicians focus on prevention of disease as well as treatment.	207 (92.00)	6 (2.66)	12 (5.33)
Family physicians earn less than other specialists.	96 (42.66)	80 (35.55)	49 (21.77)
Healthcare services in family medicine are as exciting as other specialties.	37 (16.44)	57 (25.33)	131 (58.22)
Family medicine is a respected field of application in medicine.	105 (46.66)	66 (29.33)	54 (24.00)
Family physicians take care of all the health problems of patients.	107 (47.55)	57 (25.33)	61 (27.11)
There is a long-term physician-patient relationship in family medicine.	198 (88.00)	13 (5.77)	14 (6.22)
Education in other specialties is more difficult than family medicine specialty education.	163 (72.44)	25 (11.11)	37 (16.44)
Family physicians’ work-life balance is better than other physicians.	209 (92.88)	6 (2.66)	10 (4.44)
Family physicians are respected in our society as required.	62 (27.55)	54 (24.00)	109 (48.44)

The knowledge and attitudes of students who would include FM specialization in their preferences and other students regarding FM were compared. A significant difference was found between the students in the statements “There is a need for more family physicians in Turkey” and “Healthcare services in FM are as exciting as other specialties” ($p < 0.001$). While the majority of students (79.03%) who consider FM in their

specialty preferences confirm the statement that more family physicians are needed in Turkey, the majority of students (73.26%) who do not consider FM in their specialty preferences did not confirm the statement that “healthcare services in FM are as exciting as other specialties” (Table 3).

Table 3. Comparison of the knowledge and attitudes of students who would prefer and would not prefer family medicine specialization regarding family medicine

			Preference of Family Medicine Specialty			p
			Yes	No	Undecided	
There is a need for more family physicians in Turkey.	Strongly agree/agree	n	49	47	37	0.001
		%	79.03	46.53	59.67	
	Undecided	n	10	25	19	
		%	16.12	24.75	30.64	
	Strongly disagree/disagree	n	3	29	6	
		%	4.83	28.71	9.67	
Healthcare services in family medicine are as exciting as other specialties.	Strongly agree/agree	n	22	7	8	0.001
		%	35.48	6.93	12.90	
	Undecided	n	19	20	18	
		%	30.64	19.80	29.03	
	Strongly disagree/disagree	n	21	74	36	
		%	33.87	73.26	58.06	

Discussion

The results of our study revealed that the vast majority of students want to be specialists, and less than one-third include FM in their specialty preferences. Studies conducted in Turkey have shown that the majority of medical faculty students want to work as specialists after graduation.¹⁵⁻¹⁶ In another study, it was reported that medical students did not see FM as an attractive option in career planning.¹¹ Dikici et al. reported that the preference rate of FM was 0.9% in a study they conducted with first-year students from four different universities.⁶ The results of our study suggested that interest in FM has increased in Turkey compared to the previous years.

Students’ desire for FM as a career was found to be 2.6% in Saudi Arabia, 4% in Pakistan, 4.7% in Egypt, 6.4% in Morocco.¹⁷⁻²⁰ In a study conducted in South Africa, it was reported that FM was in sixth place in the specialty preference.²¹ In a study conducted in Germany, it was reported that 49.3% of the students were interested in working as family physicians, and FM specialty was ranked 2nd among the most popular specialty preferences.²² It has been shown that 19% of students in Israel and 31.4% of clinical students in Canada are interested in FM.^{7,23} These results show that there are great differences between countries in terms of inclusion of FM in career plans by the students.

In a study conducted in Brazil, it was reported that a controllable lifestyle, financial factors, and leisure time were important factors for specialty selection for medical students and physicians.²⁴ In a study conducted in Spain, it was reported that working conditions in FM were an effective factor for specialty selection.²⁵ Kawamoto et al. reported in their study that work-life balance was an important factor in choosing FM as a career.²⁶ In a study conducted in Turkey, it was reported that a flexible lifestyle and acceptable working hours were important factors for specialty selection for medical students.²⁷ Almost all of the students (92.9%) confirmed the statement in this study that family physicians' work-life balance is better than other physicians. In addition, it was found that half of the students who stated that they would prefer the FM specialization stated the comfort/work-life balance as the most important factor for their specialization preference.

The focus of FM on a holistic approach to patients with preventive, curative, and rehabilitative services ensures that high-quality and cost-effective healthcare services are provided to communities.²⁸ In the study conducted by Alshammari et al., it was shown that the majority of Saudi students agreed that FM has the characteristics of preventive medicine, long-term physician-patient relationship, and focusing on patient holistically and contributes significantly to medicine.¹⁵ Similarly, in our study, almost all of the students confirmed the protective feature of FM, the long-term physician-patient relationship, and its important contribution to medicine.

In their nationwide study in Spain, Zurro et al. reported that less than 20% of students thought that FM has a high status within the medical profession, has a scientific prestige similar to other specialties, or is an interesting medical specialty in terms of research.²⁵ In this study, it was found that nearly half of the students considered FM to be a respected field of application in medicine but thought that family physicians are not respected in society. In addition, it was determined that the majority of students did not consider healthcare services in FM as exciting as other specialties.

Conducting the study with a limited number of students in a single-center is the limitation of our study. Therefore, the results of the study cannot be generalized. Working with more students at different universities in the future will provide better enlightenment on the subject. In addition, the validity and reliability analysis of the scale used in the study was not performed, which is another limitation of the study.

As a result, although the vast majority of the students know that FM has the characteristics of preventive medicine, long-term physician-patient relationships, and important contributions to medicine, it has been found that less than a third of them are interested in specializing in the field of FM. It was determined that the most common negative thoughts have been that healthcare services in FM are not exciting and that they are not respected in society as required. The preference of FM as a career should be increased by explaining the

importance of FM and primary healthcare services in medical faculty education and increasing the prestige of FM in society.

Ethical considerations

Approval was obtained from Gaziantep University Clinical Research Ethics Committee for the study. (Decision number: 333 Date: 21.10.2020) Informed consent of all the students who participated in the study was obtained.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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