

Agenda Item 9:

**What Influences
Medical Students And Residents
To Choose A Career In Primary Care?**

Presenter: Diane Rittenhouse, MD, MPH
Senior Fellow, Mathematica

Primary Care Physicians

- Primary care physicians are generalists who typically provide the first point of contact with the health care system. Primary care physicians take a whole-person approach (rather than specializing in a single body system or disease) and deliver comprehensive care to patients with whom they build a continuous, trusting, relationship over time
- Medical specialties typically considered primary care include family medicine, general pediatrics, general internal medicine, and geriatrics

Why This Is Important

- California faces a primary care shortage. In January 2020, 38.3% of California's population lived in a designated Primary Care Shortage Area
- Small studies and widespread anecdotal evidence suggest that trainees often lose interest in primary care over the course of medical school and residency training
- The percentage of California medical graduates that enter primary care residency each year is known to individual medical schools – anecdotally we know that this proportion varies widely among schools

Choosing Primary Care In Residency

- CalMedForce requires residency programs that apply for funding to report the percentage of graduates who provide primary care or work in an emergency department more than 50% of the time. Data submitted by programs that applied for funding in 2021 indicate that:
 - The median percentage of graduates retained in primary care or general emergency medicine ranged from 46% in pediatrics to 83% in family and community medicine
 - Rates of retention varied widely across residency programs within specialties
 - The widest variation occurred among programs in internal medicine, where the rate of retention in primary care ranged from 8% to 80%
- These findings are consistent with findings from national studies of retention in primary care

Influencers

Student Demographics and Background

- Demographic factors including gender, race and ethnicity, socioeconomic status, background, and values influence students' choices to pursue primary care residencies and careers
- Studies have found that:
 - Women and those with rural births are more likely to pursue careers in primary care
 - Students with a cited interest in working in rural settings and providing a broad scope of care are also more likely to pursue a career in primary care

Access To Strong Mentors and Role Models

- Access to strong mentors and role models in primary care positively influence students' specialty choice
 - Students with positive primary care role models and students who completed a formal mentoring program in primary care were more likely to pursue primary care specialties
 - Students reported positive mentoring experiences as an important factor in their decision to pursue a career in primary care

Medical School Environment

- Prevailing attitudes towards primary care among peers and medical school faculty have an important influence on student specialty choices
 - Students who attend schools with a higher prevalence of negative comments about primary care from staff and other students are less likely to become primary care physicians
- Students are more likely to choose primary care if it has been integrated into the curriculum
 - Students were more likely to hold primary care in high regard if primary care materials were integrated into the preclinical curriculum
 - Rotations in primary care positively impact students' likelihood of choosing to specialize in primary care

The Role Of Medical School Debt Remains Unclear

- When surveyed, medical students did not list debt as a main consideration for selecting a specialty
- However, studies found that:
 - As medical debt increases, residents are more likely to pursue an additional fellowship or pursue a career as a hospitalist
 - Students with higher debt were more likely to list future income as an important factor in their specialty choice and students who reported a higher value for the importance of income were more likely to switch from pursuing a primary career to a non-primary care career

Income And Lifestyle Are Increasingly Important Factors In Student Specialty Choices

- Nationally, specialties with lower incomes, such as primary care, have consistently lower residency fill rates
- Students drawn to subspecialty fields that offer a more controllable lifestyle with greater work-life balance

Discussion

- What can HCAI do to increase the proportion of students graduating from California medical schools that ultimately choose primary care as their career?
- How can HCAI better track and report proportions of California medical students that ultimately choose primary care as their career?