

The scope and role of family medicine in health care system of Pakistan: perceptions of health care professionals

Muhammad Imran Sohail¹, Ghulam Mujtaba Nasir², Haroon Rashid Khan³, Muaz Bin Sajjad⁴

¹Assistant Professor, Community Medicine, Islamabad Medical and Dental College, Islamabad

²European Fellowship at Robert Gordon University, United Kingdom

³Public Health Specialist, Department of Community Medicine, Islamabad Medical and Dental College, Islamabad

⁴Polio Eradication Officer WHO. Sawabi

Author's Contribution

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²Manuscript writing, data analysis

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Address of Correspondent

Dr. Haroon Rashid Khan

Public Health Specialist,

Department of Community

Medicine, Islamabad Medical and

Dental College, Bahrahaku

Islamabad

drharoon.clinix@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Objective: To assess and compare the discernments of medical students and healthcare professionals about family medicine as a distinct speciality, and effect of awareness session on their comprehension.

Methodology: This cross-sectional study was conducted on 4th year and final year under graduate students and professional doctors working in different hospital of twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad. A lecture on "family medicine and its scope as a career" was arranged for the students of 4th year and final year students. Similarly, a workshop on "family medicine and its scope as a career" was arranged and professional doctors were invited. A predesigned self-administered questionnaire already used by a similar study, was given to all the students before and after the awareness session to students and doctors.

Results: A total of 225 participants were included consisting on 170 undergraduate students and 55 professional doctors working in different hospitals of twin cities. There were 68 (40%) male participants in undergraduate and 30 (54.54%) male participants among professional doctors. The mean age of undergraduate students was 21.45+1.26 years and mean age of professional doctors was 32.65+3.35 years. Less than half 80 (47.06%) of the undergraduate students had knowledge about the family medicine as speciality but in professional doctors almost all 50 (90.91%) participants know family medicine as speciality. Almost all undergraduate students 145 (85.29%) and professional doctors 52 (94.54%) feel that family medicine can improve the health care in Pakistan.

Conclusion: It is necessary to include the family medicine as part of curriculum for undergraduate medical students to develop interest in this newly emerging vital speciality, which can help in betterment of health care in this country.

Keywords: Family Medicine, undergraduate students, awareness

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Introduction

Family medicine is an essential part of Primary Care that is considered a mandatory part of any successful health care delivery system. This is because of its front line position in health care delivery. This unique position

allows Family Physicians to work in the community where patients and families live, offering easy access and equity in the health care delivery system. Focus of Family Medicine on holistic approach including preventive, curative and rehabilitative services ensures that high

quality and cost effective health care services are offered to communities and families.^{1,2}

The basic health care system of any country usually consist of family physicians or general practitioners, who are responsible for providing basic healthcare to the community. These healthcare professional have fundamental role for primary healthcare system.³ With advancement of technology and easy access of latest knowledge have drastically changed the health care systems around the world. The main focus of this modern health care system is on providing community oriented primary health care. The family physicians have a relationship with families because they are uniquely qualified to serve as patient's advocates in health-related issues as well as to make judicious use of referrals to consultants, community resources and health services.⁴

The efficiency of primary health care system of any country depends upon the quality of health care system in any country. The introduction of family medicine have ability to increase the efficiency of health care system. The other advantages of family medicine inclusion in health care system consist of cost effectiveness and more beneficial for the patients and so for the country.⁵

Primary health care is a main focus point of health policy makers, but this speciality is not getting much importance in Pakistan and very few Pakistani medical students are showing their interest in family medicine or general practice as their career of preference. Majority of doctors who chose general practice as profession, they don't choose it by choice, but they come in this field due to other personal circumstances including economic issues. Despite the fact that so many Pakistani medical graduates become general practitioners, it is ironic that most of these schools where they graduated from do not have a defined curriculum for Family Medicine.⁶

The concept of Family Medicine took roots in Pakistan as part of Community Medicine introducing concepts of primary, preventive healthcare in the undergraduate curriculum of a private medical school in the 1980s. GPs took on the responsibility of familiarising medical students with the principles of community ambulatory practice. However, the core model of family practice was seen later in the 1990s when the same university developed its first postgraduate training programme in Family Medicine, recruiting medical graduates for a four year training programme that encompassed the principles of holistic, cost-effective, patient and family centred healthcare and wellbeing.⁷

A comprehensive health care system depends upon primary health care for which the role of family physicians has great importance. That's why family medicine is an integral part of training given to the doctors in developed countries but in developing countries it is not the practice due to some obstacles including financial issues, deficiency of resources and skills. The main hurdle in development of family medicine is poor interest of health care professionals in this speciality. This study has been planned to identify whether medical students and healthcare professionals are aware of family medicine as a distinct specialty, whether they are aware of the role of family medicine as a specialty to improve healthcare and their preference to choose this specialty as a career?

Methodology

This cross-sectional study was conducted on 4th year and final year under graduate students of MBBS from two different medical colleges of Islamabad, similarly the professional doctors working in different hospital in of twin cities of Rawalpindi and Islamabad were part of the study. A lecture on "family medicine and its scope as a career" was arranged for the students of 4th year and final year in Islamabad medical and dental college, and federal medical and dental college. Similarly, a workshop on "family medicine and its scope as a career" was arranged and professional doctors were invited form different hospital of Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

A predesigned self-administered questionnaire already used by a similar study,¹⁶ was given to all the students before and after the lecture. Same questionnaire was given prior and post workshop to doctors participated in the workshop. In the questionnaire, all the professionals were inquired about their knowledge of family medicine, choices about the career of their interest, considerations that might affect the choice of career. In this study the effectiveness of lectures and seminar was assessed to develop interest in family medicine at undergraduate students and professional health care doctors. Similarly, their perceptions and understanding about the family medicine and its role to improve primary health care system.

The collected data was entered and analyzed with statistical package for social sciences SPSS v. 21. Quantitative data was presented in the form of mean and standard deviation and qualitative data was presented with the help of frequency and percentages. Chi-square

test was applied to compare the qualitative data. P-value < 0.05 was considered significant.

Results

There were 68 (40%) male participants in undergraduate and 30 (54.54%) male participants among professional doctors. Majority 160 (94.12%) of the participants in undergraduate students belonged to age group of 18-25 years followed by 10 (5.88%) participants in age interval of 26-35 years. Among professional doctors' main bulk 32 (58.82%) belonged to 26-35 years of age, following by 12 (21.82%) professionals having age 36-45 years and 6 (10.91%) professionals of age more than 45 years. The mean age of undergraduate students was 21.45+1.26 years and mean age of professional doctors' group was 32.65+3.35 years as elaborated in table I.

Less than half 80 (47.06%) of the undergraduate students had knowledge about the family medicine as speciality but in professional doctors almost all 50 (90.91%) participants know family medicine as speciality. This difference was statistically significant (p-value < 0.05). Regarding post of family medicine specialist both undergraduate students and professional doctors had equally (p-value >0.05) high recommendation for creation of the post for encouragement to adapt the family medicine as career. Almost all of the participants of the study including undergraduate students 145 (85.29%) and professional doctors 52 (94.54%) feel that

Table I: Demographic characteristics of the participants

Characteristics	Undergraduate (n= 170)	Professional Doctors (n= 55)
	N (%) Percentage	N (%) Percentage
Gender of the participants		
Male	68(40%)	30(54.54%)
Female	102(60%)	25(45.45%)
Age of the participants		
18-25	160(94.12%)	5(9.10%)
26-35	10(5.88%)	32(58.82%)
36-45	0(0%)	12(21.82%)
> 45	0(0%)	6(10.91%)
Mean Age	21.45+1.26	32.65+3.35

family medicine can improve the health care in Pakistan. The opinion was similar (p-value > 0.05) without any difference with respect to undergraduate or professional doctor. Prior to attending the session of family medicine, the consideration of family medicine as a career was significantly (p-value < 0.05) different between undergraduate students 71 (41.76%) and professional doctors 40 (72.73%). That is the professional doctors were more in favor of choosing the family medicine as their career in comparison to undergraduate students. After attending the session, the number of participants increased considerably but the difference between opinion of undergraduate students 105 (61.76%) and professional doctors 48 (87.27%) remained significant (p-value < 0.05) and the professional doctors persisted more in favour of family medicine as their career as given in detail in table II.

Table II: Distribution and comparison of knowledge and choice of family medicine as career among undergraduate students and professional doctors

Questions	Undergraduate (n= 170)		Professional Doctors (n= 55)		P-Value
	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	
Did you know about Family Medicine as Speciality?					
Yes	80	47.06%	50	90.91%	0.0001 *
No	90	52.94%	5	9.10%	
Do you think the creation of family medicine specialist post can encourage health care professionals to select he family medicine as career?					
Yes	147	86.47%	49	89.10%	0.6142 **
No	23	13.53%	6	10.91%	
Do you think Pakistani health care system can be improved by a comprehensive primary health care family medicine?					
Yes	145	85.29%	52	94.54%	0.0708 **
No	25	14.70%	3	5.45%	
Do you think family medicine could be your consideration as a career speciality, prior to this session?					
Yes	71	41.76%	40	72.73%	0.0000 *
No	99	58.23%	15	27.23%	
Do you think family medicine as career speciality after the session?					
Yes	105	61.76%	48	87.27%	0.0004 *
No	65	38.23%	7	12.73%	

* The difference is significant at 5% level of significance

** The difference is not significant at 5% level of significance

Discussion

It is an issue of great concern that most of the people living in developing countries are far behind the human development standards containing health indicators as well. This situation exists in whole developing world including Pakistan. The situation is very alarming because great efforts are being made to promote the equity in the world.⁹ These concerns become more highlighted by witnessing the variations among health indicators throughout the world. A good example of this disparity can be of life expectancy of 65.4 years in Pakistan, which is considerably very low as compare to any developed country like Japan, where it is 83 years. It is interesting to note that despite these disparities, health indicators are better in countries with strong primary care emphasis in their healthcare delivery.¹⁰

Family Medicine, a synonym used for general practice in many countries, refers to the provision of primary care to individuals and family members, from the youngest to the oldest, within the context of the family and the community, and with emphasis on health promotion and disease prevention.¹¹ The training and introductory programmes will bring awareness of the subject to medical students and through them to families and friends. Its presence may awaken hospitals and their staff to the importance of Family Medicine in healthcare and help to redress the disparagement experienced by students and graduates contemplating such a career. Most importantly, the training will energise the campaign for postgraduate programmes in Family Medicine, which hardly exist in Pakistan.¹²

The introduction of family medicine as a speciality in modern primary health care system can improve health care system of any country, but in developing countries including Pakistan the enhancement of primary health care system has not got any importance and no attention is paying on improvement of health care policies in Pakistan as well. Only one serious step for implementation of this speciality in Pakistan was taken by Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC) in 2014, when all the medical colleges in Pakistan were directed to make this speciality as a mandatory part of the examination of final year students, however, this has not yet given any fruitful results.¹³

Pakistan lacks any substantial move towards family medicine in terms of medical education. The majority of medical students are not aware of training opportunities

in family medicine and so very few takes this as a career option. Studies previously conducted have shown a trend towards choosing hospital-based specialities.¹⁴ When compared, the results of this present study showed a similar trend, however, there were some interesting improvements over the previously conducted studies. Our participants when made aware of the options intimated post-seminar they would consider family medicine as a career option despite apparent declining interest in the developed world. In addition, where autocratic health systems may be considered a luxury in the developing world^{15,16}, this study shows further requirement of research to guide policy makers as well as practitioners in using approaches within the community to improve outcomes.¹⁷

Pakistani students are who are aware of importance of family medicine have lack of interest in this field as without an established environment of structured and modern primary healthcare in which family physicians' practice, they have little exposure to view first-hand what it means to form long-term relationships with patients and their families as is often seen in the Western model of general practice. Apart from these factors, financial incentives, and poor remuneration in general practice also tend to deter students from choosing family medicine as a career.¹⁸ However, with up to 90% of participants post-seminar believing family medicine could improve health care in Pakistan, this study demonstrates that a simple intervention (seminar) can help educate health care professionals and trainees into understanding the need for family medicine and its impact on disease burden.¹⁹

The awareness of family medicine speciality amongst medical students and healthcare professionals is need of the hour in Pakistan to improve the health care.

Many steps can be taken to attract the medical professionals to this speciality. The main reason of low interest is lack of awareness so by introduction of family medicine departments in medical colleges, students and house officers can be motivated towards this field. Before this immediately awareness lectures and seminars by the current trained family physicians in Pakistan in medical schools will help to encourage students to explore this speciality and adopt it in the future.

Conclusion

It is necessary to include the family medicine as part of curriculum for undergraduate medical students to develop interest in this newly emerging vital speciality, which can

help in betterment of health care in this country. A significant effect of awareness session was observed on both undergraduate students and professional doctors in developing their interest in family medicine and its choice as a career.

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