

ENT in general practice: training, experience and referral rates

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Abstract

A postal survey of 500 general practitioners (GPs) in south-west England was undertaken to evaluate the levels of undergraduate and postgraduate otolaryngology training and/or experience received by GPs in that area. Most GPs had received two weeks of undergraduate training in ENT, which had involved no formal assessment. Three-quarters of GPs considered this inadequate. A quarter of GPs had completed a hospital post in ENT prior to entering general practice, most of which lasted three months. Sixty-one per cent of GPs had received some formal postgraduate training in ENT, in the form of courses, lectures or hospital training sessions. Almost half of the GPs considered this inadequate. Seventy-five per cent of GPs stated they would like further training in ENT. Subjective estimates of referral rates to hospital ENT specialist clinics varied considerably.

This study illustrates the variability and level of dissatisfaction regarding ENT training amongst GPs at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels.

Key words: Otolaryngology; Family Practice; Education, Medical; Undergraduate; Postgraduate; Hospital Referral

Introduction

It is estimated that 10 to 20 per cent of general practitioner (GP) consultations involve complaints arising from the ears, nose or throat.¹ In children, this rate rises to around 50 per cent.² Whilst GPs successfully assess and treat the majority of these patients, ENT referrals constitute the third largest group of patients referred to hospital specialist clinics.³

The otolaryngology training received by GPs is variable at both undergraduate and postgraduate level.^{4,5} Previous studies have demonstrated that the average medical school ENT course lasts one and a half weeks, and 42 per cent involve no formal assessment.⁴ Postgraduate training in ENT is received by less than half of GPs and, when asked, most GPs state that they would welcome further training in the specialty.⁵

The effect of this variability and inadequacy of GP training in ENT is unclear, and the impact on referral rates to hospital specialist clinics is unknown.⁶

The aim of this study was to establish the current level of ENT training and experience amongst GPs in south-west England and to assess the perceived adequacy of this training. Furthermore, we aimed to examine whether experience and training affects referral rates to hospital specialist clinics.

Materials and methods

This survey was conducted by postal questionnaire. Contact details for GP practices in south-west England were obtained from local primary care trusts. Five hundred GPs were selected at random and were sent a questionnaire. After three weeks, those practices that had not responded were sent a reminder letter.

The survey was anonymous. The questionnaire collected details of the GP's medical school, year of graduation, and undergraduate and postgraduate ENT training, and it enquired about the GP's perceived levels of satisfaction regarding the training they had received. The GPs were asked to estimate their ENT workload and referral rate to hospital specialist clinics (Appendix 1).

Results and analysis

Of the 500 questionnaires sent out, a total of 357 (71 per cent) were returned completed. Ninety-four per cent of respondents had trained in the UK, and their year of qualification ranged from 1966 to 1999 (Figure 1).

Undergraduate ENT training

Most GPs had received two weeks (43 per cent) or four weeks (25 per cent) of undergraduate ENT

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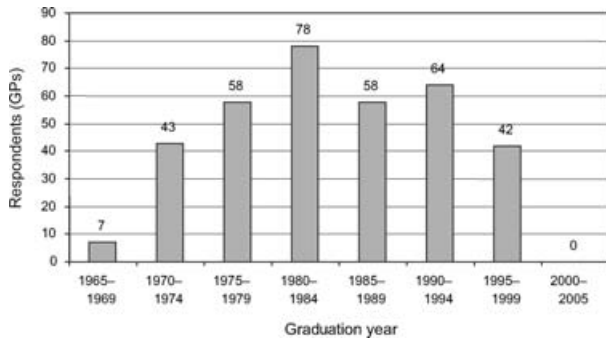


FIG. 1
Respondents' year of graduation.

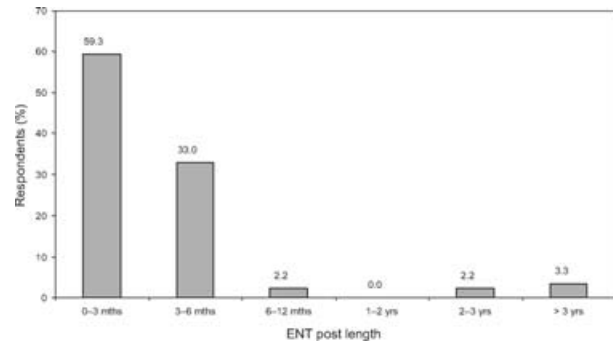


FIG. 3
Duration of respondents' hospital ENT posts. Mths = months; yrs = years.

training, with a median course length of 2.8 weeks (range 0–13 weeks; Figure 2). Only 21 per cent of undergraduate ENT courses had included a formal examination. Twenty-four per cent of GPs stated that their undergraduate training had been adequate. In the subgroup of GPs who had undergone an undergraduate exam in ENT, this level of satisfaction rose to 33 per cent. The duration of the undergraduate course had no statistically significant effect on the perceived adequacy of training.

Postgraduate ENT training

Twenty-six per cent of GPs had held a hospital ENT post. Most of these had been as senior house officers (SHOs) (78 per cent) or clinical assistants (16 per cent). The duration of the posts had ranged from two months to 15 years, but the majority were three or six months in length (Figure 3).

Sixty-one per cent of GPs had received formal postgraduate teaching in ENT, in the form of courses (26 per cent), lectures (58 per cent) or hospital sessions (38 per cent). Nineteen per cent had received combinations of these.

In total, 70 per cent of GPs had received some form of hospital experience or postgraduate training in ENT. When asked, only 45 per cent stated that this postgraduate training had been adequate. This level of satisfaction was significantly higher in those who had held a hospital ENT post (74 per cent,

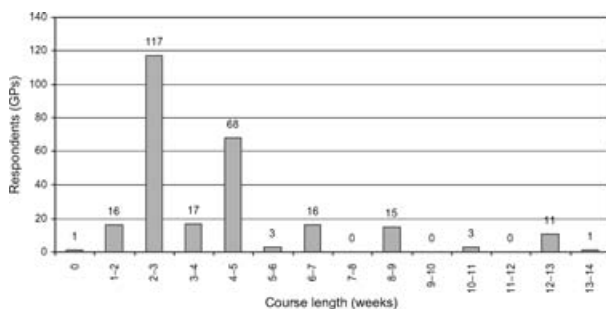


FIG. 2
Duration of respondents' undergraduate ENT courses.

$p < 0.001$) or had received formal postgraduate teaching (59 per cent, $p < 0.001$).

Desire for further training

Seventy-five per cent of the GPs surveyed stated they would like more training in ENT. This proportion was significantly lower, at 56 per cent, if the individual had already held a hospital ENT post ($p < 0.001$) and slightly lower, at 70 per cent, in those who had received formal postgraduate training ($p = 0.007$).

ENT workload

On average, the GPs conducted 32.4 consultations per working day. When asked to estimate how many of these involved ENT cases, the mean response was 9.4 per cent (range 1 to 40 per cent). Of those cases involving ENT, 5.4 per cent (range 0 to 50 per cent) were referred to a hospital ENT service. Interestingly, this referral rate was not significantly different for GPs who had done a hospital ENT term or received formal postgraduate ENT training. There was a slight rise in referral rates amongst those who stated they would like more ENT training (5.8 versus 4.6 per cent; $p = 0.079$).

Discussion

These findings raise a number of interesting points regarding the standard and satisfaction of ENT training amongst GPs in south-west England.

There was a small difference in these GPs' undergraduate training, compared with the findings of recent surveys of undergraduate ENT training.⁴ This suggests that the average length of undergraduate ENT training has fallen from 3.7 weeks to a reported 1.5 weeks, although the most common course length remains two weeks. There has been a concurrent rise in the proportion of medical schools requiring formal ENT examination, from 21 to 42 per cent. This may represent a change in the approach of most medical school ENT attachments, towards shorter and more assessment-orientated courses.

Seventy per cent of the south-west England GPs surveyed had received some form of postgraduate ENT training, either in the form of hospital ENT posts or postgraduate teaching. This result was much higher than previous findings. In the Trent region in 1992, only 39 per cent of GPs had received similar training.⁵ The proportion of GPs who had completed an ENT SHO post remained similar (20 per cent in south-west England, 17 per cent in Trent), but there was a large increase in the number of GPs who had attended postgraduate courses, lectures and hospital sessions. This overall difference in GP postgraduate training may reflect changes over time or between regions.

Despite the rise in ENT postgraduate training, three-quarters of GPs stated that they would like further teaching. This proportion was slightly lower if the GP had completed an ENT SHO post, but, even in this group, around half the GPs stated they would like to receive more training.

The wide range of estimates of ENT referral rates made statistical analysis difficult. This survey was unable to show that ENT training or experience significantly affected GPs' referral rates to hospital clinics. Subjective estimates may be unreliable, and more objective measurement of referral rates is required in order to accurately address this issue.

This study shows that GPs in south-west England are receiving more postgraduate training than has previously been reported. Despite this, most GPs felt that their preparation for dealing with ENT problems in general practice had been inadequate and that they would like more training. The greatest measurable influence on GPs' levels of satisfaction was completion of a hospital ENT post. An argument can be made for offering more GP trainees the opportunity to work in hospital ENT departments and for providing more ENT training to qualified GPs.

- **In general practice, up to 20 per cent of adult and 50 per cent of paediatric consultations involve ENT cases**
- **There is no agreed standard or compulsory ENT training for GPs**
- **Most GPs receive two or four weeks of undergraduate training in ENT and most are not assessed**
- **Only a quarter of GPs have experience of a hospital ENT post**
- **Sixty-one per cent of GPs receive some formal postgraduate ENT training**
- **Most GPs feel their undergraduate training is inadequate**
- **Half of GPs feel their postgraduate training is inadequate**
- **Most GPs would like further ENT training.**
- **Subjective estimations of referral rates to specialist clinics are highly variable and may be unreliable**

These findings are of particular importance in light of the recent plans put forward by the Department of Health to bring specialist care to the community, as training in ENT does not reduce referral rates to secondary care. If any part of the burden of specialist ENT provision is to be transferred to general practitioners, the focus should be on hospital-based training rather than on training courses.

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Appendix 1. Questionnaire to evaluate general practitioners' ENT training and ENT-related workload

Questions about your ENT training

Undergraduate:

1. Year of graduation from medical school: _____
2. Name of medical school: _____
3. Country (please circle): UK / Non-UK
4. Time dedicated to ENT in medical school:
Duration: Weeks _____ Months _____ Can't remember
5. Did you have a separate ENT examination during your training (please circle)?
Yes No Can't remember
Postgraduate:
6. Have you been in any ENT posts? Yes No
If yes, please specify: SHO Registrar Staff grade Other
Duration: Weeks _____ Months _____ Years _____
7. Have you had any postgraduate ENT training?
Yes No
If yes, please specify: Course Informal sessions at hospital Lectures
8. Do you have any ENT postgraduate qualification? Yes No
If yes, please specify: DLO DOHNS FRCS(ENT) Other: _____
9. Was the ENT training you have received as an undergraduate adequate / inadequate (please circle)?
10. Was the ENT training you have received as a postgraduate adequate / inadequate / N/A (please circle)?
11. Would you like to undertake further training in ENT? Yes No

Appendix 1. Continued*Questions about ENT in your practice*

12. How many patients do you see in an average day? (not just ENT): _____
13. Approximately what percentage of them have had ENT-related problems? _____%
14. What percentage of your time at work is taken up dealing with ENT problems? _____%
15. Amongst these patients, what percentage of them do you refer to a hospital ENT service? _____%

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Mr P J Clamp takes responsibility for the integrity of the content of the paper.
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