Career counselling for Canada’s future physicians
Results of the 2012 National Physician Survey of medical students and residents

As future physicians prepare for their careers, proper training may be key; however, some anxiety may also exist surrounding how they will go about actually finding jobs when the time comes. The 2012 National Physician Survey (NPS) asked medical residents and students about the various career counselling services they have used over the course of their training.

Residents and future employment
In 2012, the vast majority (85%) of all residents indicate being “very satisfied” or “satisfied” (satisfied) with their current residency training program according to the NPS. Despite having a similar degree of overall satisfaction with their training, when pondering their future employment opportunities, those in other specialty medicine (SM) residency appear more stressed than their colleagues in family medicine (FM) programs. In fact, 43% of FM residents indicated no stress at all associated with finding employment at the end of their training, compared to an average of 20% of residents in other specialty programs. Still, half of FM residents and three quarters of SM residents admit to some stress about future employment.

Many medical programs offer career counselling to future physicians through seminars, group sessions and the like (Figure 1). With respect to such support mechanisms, proportionally more FM residents appear satisfied (52%) than those in SM programs, 45% of whom indicate satisfaction. This difference may not be surprising given that 45% of SM residents reported having no formal counselling at all compared to 29% of FM residents.

According to NPS respondents, about a third (34%) of FM residents, overall, received formal counselling that included information on how to search for employment at some point in their residency to date, while only 14% of SM residents received the same. By their third year, the proportion increases to 60% for FM residents though for SM residents, the proportion receiving counselling on this topic remains between 15% and 17% for all years after their first. Both groups, however, were more likely to receive informal counselling on this front (46% FM; 45% SM); for example, through one-on-one meetings or hallway conversations.

A similar trend can be seen with respect to other types of career counselling in residency. While 30% of FM residents revealed they had received formal counselling on the state of employability in their field, the percentage appears greater with more years of training. By third year, as many as 50% of FM residents indicate receiving this guidance compared with less than a quarter (24%) of first years. A quarter of those in their third year of residency in other specialties received this information compared to 12% of first year respondents, though the percentage did not continue to rise for those in later years. Across all years of training, 21% of SM residents formally received information on the state of employability in their specialty. Informally, this information was shared with an average of 67% of SM residents and 60% of FM residents.

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But does career counselling lower stress associated with finding employment at the end of medical training? Residents receiving any counselling (formal or informal) at all were only slightly more likely to report no stress. Receiving formal training, however, particularly in certain areas, was associated with a greater likelihood of no stress. Four out of 10 (40%) residents who received formal counselling including information on specific employment opportunities (51% of FM and 25% of SM) indicated no stress about future employment compared to 27% of overall respondents (43% FM and 20% SM overall). More than a third (36%) who had received formal counselling involving information regarding career path options (52% of FM; 25% SM) also indicated no stress.

Though formal counselling may assist at keeping stress at bay, all residents indicated receiving most of their career counselling information informally rather than formally.

Students and future employment
Like residents, most students (88%) also reported satisfaction with their current training, but harbour some stress when it comes to future employment (68% stating very or somewhat stressful). Fewer of those who are feeling stress report satisfaction (59%) with the career counselling available to them compared to those who are not stressed (71% satisfied).

As with medical residents, the career counselling received by the students was more likely to be informal rather than formal, with the exception of information regarding career path options in which
52% of students received formal counselling compared to 47% informal. Interestingly, the highest rate of formal counselling of this kind was reported by first year students (57%) and the proportion decreased across years of training (39% of fourth years). The opposite is true for informal training. While 36% of first years were counseled informally regarding career path options, the proportion for fourth years was 53%.

Similarly, formal counselling on information regarding the state of employability and employment opportunities appears to be more available in earlier years of training (35% and 22% respectively of first years) while fewer of those in later years of medical school indicate receiving these supports (18% and 6% respectively for fourth years). Like with information on career paths, informal counselling in these areas appears to help bridge the gap the further along in medical school. Forty three percent (43%) of first years indicated that information on the state of employability was available to them informally, while 57% of fourth years said the same. With respect to employment opportunities, 28% of first years had some informal counselling as did 36% of fourth years. About 30% of students overall formally received information on the state of employability, 51% informally, and 14% receive formal counselling on employment opportunities (31% informal).

Nineteen percent of students have received formal counselling on how to apply for a position and a further 29% informally. More students are provided formal training is this arena later in their training, with 40% of fourth years reporting this.

Figure 2: Percent of medical students who have received formal counselling by level of stress about finding future employment, 2012
For each category of counselling, students were more likely to say they were feeling no stress about future employment if they had received formal counselling in that area (Figure 2). For example, of those who felt no stress, 59% indicated receiving formal counselling on career path options, while fewer of those who indicated “somewhat” and “very stressful” (stressed) received such counselling formally (51%). Also, over a third (35%) with no stress received formal counselling on the state of employability, compared to 28% of those feeling stressed.

On the other hand, the opposite was true for receiving informal counselling. It seems that more informal counselling is associated with more stress, which was true for all categories. (Figure 3)

Figure 3: Percent of medical students who have received informal counselling by level of stress about finding future employment, 2012

When preparing for their careers, future physicians generally appear satisfied with their training, but fewer are satisfied with the degree of counselling available to them with respect to career planning. While a variety of career counselling opportunities exist both formally and informally for medical students and residents, more reported receiving informal counselling (one-on-one meetings, hallway conversations) than formal (seminars, group sessions). Where residents are concerned, the 2012 NPS results suggest that those in family medicine programs are more likely to receive formal training than
their colleagues in other specialty programs. For students, the proportion receiving formal counselling appears to decrease over their years in medical school for most counselling programs. It is, however, the formal counselling, rather than informal counselling that appears to be associated with lower stress when thinking about their future careers.

Response rates, results and methodology can be found at [www.nationalphysiciansurvey.ca](http://www.nationalphysicianssurvey.ca).

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