Supporting career choices in dentistry

Abstract

The Cork University Dental School & Hospital, University College Cork, introduced an innovative programme in April 2011, which provided prospective dental students with an opportunity to participate in a one-day experiential workshop. The aim of the workshop was to provide students with an overview of the dental undergraduate programmes. Feedback on the workshop was exceptionally positive, and prospective students would recommend the workshop to a fellow student, as it helped to inform their decision about choosing dentistry as a first option.

Introduction

In April 2011, the Cork University Dental School & Hospital (CUDSH) provided prospective dental students with an opportunity to participate in a one-day experiential workshop. Similar workshops have been implemented in medical schools, for example in the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland, but this was the first reported workshop designed specifically for prospective undergraduate dental students. The aim of the workshop was to provide students with an overview of the dental undergraduate programmes Bachelor in Dental Surgery, Diploma in Dental Hygiene and Diploma in Dental Nursing. The workshop addressed the following topics: introduction to the human dentition; patient management; cross-infection control; specialties in dentistry; and, dental materials.

Career decision making

Making choices about a career can be difficult at any stage of life, but it is particularly arduous in adolescence. Traditionally, the information students receive to inform career choices in dentistry is obtained either through their career guidance teacher or from university open days. Making a fully informed choice can be difficult, especially in the area of medicine and health, as programmes in this area generally require students to deal with the public, develop manual skills, and are academically challenging. In vocational psychology, career decision-making models support interventions to improve students’ understanding of the world of work, helping the student to enhance self-knowledge, as well as clarifying career and educational goals. This allows students to determine what qualities of the occupation they find appealing. However, when career decision making is examined, state that students frequently mention vicarious exposure to work experiences as shaping their expected choices and that young people normally recruit others to assist with their decision making. This led the authors to conclude that “endorsement of experiential factors supports the practice of exposing students to career exploration activities that enable them to clarify interests, values, and skills in relation to a particular occupational field”.

To this end, the dental workshop provided a framework to enhance the students’ overall understanding and improve their ability to make effective career choices. This is a highly effective educational method because it engages the learner at a more personal level.
Recruitment of students
Recruitment of the secondary school participants commenced in February 2011 when 82 schools in Cork City and County were contacted. A letter from Cork University Dental School & Hospital was sent to each career guidance teacher in the schools outlining the details of the dental workshop. Twenty five students (nine male and 16 female) were offered placement on the workshop.

Dental attitudes
To gain insight into student motivation for choosing a career in dentistry, the Dental Attitude Questionnaire (DAQ) was administered and collected at the end of the workshop. Completion of the questionnaire and the evaluation sheet was voluntary. In addition, an evaluation sheet rating components of the workshop was also circulated.

The DAQ is a 12-item scale to assess students’ influences and attitudes for selecting a career in dentistry. Students were asked to rate each question on a scale from 0-10, with 0 being the least influential factor and 10 being the extremely influential factor in choosing dentistry as a career.

The most influential aspects of making a choice of dentistry as a career were: appearance/health (“I want to help people improve their appearance or oral health”); self-employment; regular hours; and, career aspirations. Less influential factors were having a relative or family member with a career in dentistry, or that they were encouraged by others to pursue a career in dentistry. The main consideration for both males and females was helping people to improve their appearance or oral health, but males also scored self-employment and the ability to begin practice after graduating as decisive factors.

A qualitative assessment of the student’s evaluation of the workshop ranked the following aspects as excellent: information appropriate and interesting; content explained expertly; duration; and, quality of handouts. Students indicated that the main learning factors from the dental workshop were academic information and patient management. Of particular benefit was information regarding entry requirements to the various courses, the content of the programmes and interpersonal aspects of patient management. Students reported that the academic information gave them “an overall sense of what the course actually involved and the subjects covered in each academic year”. With regard to patient management, the important aspects were “how to effectively communicate and interact with patients”. The cohort found the workshop to be beneficial and all students would recommend the workshop to a fellow secondary student with an interest in pursuing a dental career.

Conclusion
Overall, feedback on the workshop was exceptionally positive. Students stated that the dental workshop contributed in a meaningful and positive way to their educational and vocational understanding of what a professional career in dentistry demanded. The workshop created learning experiences that introduced students to the skills and competencies necessary for a successful career in dentistry. In addition, identifying their motivation for choosing a career in dentistry also provided valuable insight and introspection, which enhanced the student’s self-knowledge, thus empowering them to make an informed career decision.

References