INTRODUCTION

Many hospital specialties are experiencing problems with recruitment and retention. Anaesthetists, while still a popular option for core training, is facing difficulties with retention at higher levels of training. In order to attract and retain trainees, it is essential to identify factors of importance to trainees at different points of entry into training programmes, as these may impact on retention.

We investigated trainee priorities, and how these change over time in Anaesthetists training.

METHODS

This mixed-methods prospective study utilised questionnaire surveys and qualitative interviews to explore how priorities of a group of trainees changed from entry to core training, and 18 months later, prior to specialty training applications.

Trainees beginning anaesthesia training in Scotland at end 2014 (n=68) were contacted with an invitation to participate and a link to the online survey. Individual, semi-structured, telephone interviews were conducted with a sub-group of respondents. After 18 months, the process was repeated within the same cohort. Ethical approval was obtained. Responses were analysed using descriptive statistics, chi-squared analysis and thematic framework analysis to identify key themes.

RESULTS

Forty-two responses were received to the initial study (62%), with 28 responses to the follow-up study (41%), representing trainees in all Scottish regions.

- The survey data highlighted trainees at point of entry place greatest emphasis on high quality, structured training.
- At 18 months, although this remained important, elements of the learning environment had become a greater priority – morale, senior support, working conditions and personal wellbeing.

- Loss of work-life balance was the factor that would contribute most to trainees leaving the specialty.
- Under half (46%) were planning to remain in UK Anaesthetics training at this point with 25% planning to take time out prior to applying for specialist training.

Interview data suggested that trainees feel the brief period of core training means some elements can be tolerated, but the longer period of specialty training means these elements become more important when considering plans to remain in a specialty or geographical area.

Table 2. Themes arising of importance to trainees

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| Junior doctor life balance (46%) | Trainees commented that life outside of work was becoming more important, they were less interested in working days or nights 

Figure 2. Trainee comments from qualitative interviews

DISCUSSION

- Todays trainees seek high quality training, flexibility, opportunity and support.
- The learning environment plays a significant role in contributing to training quality and trainee satisfaction.
- The working / learning environment becomes increasingly important as training progresses.
- Work-life balance is the single most important factor to trainees.

Of practical importance is insight into the specific factors which contribute to anaesthesia trainees’ perceptions of their learning environment: ensuring the factors which are most important to trainees are acknowledged and addressed (if required), may inform the development and sustainability of high-quality, attractive learning environments which may, in turn, attract and retain trainees.

Clearly, this may be a challenge in environments where high attrition has led to low staffing levels with a resulting negative impact on workload, educational opportunities and morale.

Possible ways to stop this vicious circle include prioritising trainee needs and maintaining morale across departments, neither of which may be easily achieved when increased clinical demands for those remaining impacts on time available for educational opportunities.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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