



**AALBORG  
UNIVERSITY**

# Early clerkship in general practice

A qualitative study of medical students' experiences

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## Abstract

**Background:** Attracting medical students to become general practitioners has become very hard. Medical students choose specialty because of many different factors. Several studies have focused on different factors influencing the medical students' career choice, but few studies have focused on clerkships in general practice in this context.

**Aim:** The aim of this study is to explore how the experience of early general practice clerkships affect the medical students' perception of the work as general practitioner.

**Method:** Qualitative semi-structured interviews were conducted among fourth-year medical students from Aalborg University who had completed their first clerkship in general practice. The results were analysed using systematic text condensation by Kirsti Malterud as approach.

**Results:** Seven interviews were conducted, and three major themes were found during the analysis. These were perception of the general practitioners' work, the professional life of the general practitioner and the relationship between general practitioner and patient. All the medical students were surprised by the general practitioner's workload regarding psychiatric patients, as the medical students thought the general practitioner mostly dealt with somatic illness. The general practitioners had a better opportunity to plan their work schedule and organize their professional life than hospital doctors did, and this was an advantage seen from the medical students' point of view. Furthermore, the medical students liked the idea that the general practitioners had the opportunity to follow the patients through most of the patients' lives.

**Conclusion:** Although we did not find that the early clerkship in general practice convinced the medical students to pursue a career in general practice, the clerkships made the medical students familiar with the characteristics of the specialty, made them consider general practice as specialty choice and gave them a valuable insight into the working lives of the general practitioners. Therefore, early clerkships in general practice have the potential to attract medical students to a general practice career.

## Introduction

Through the last years attracting medical students to choose general practice as a career has become harder and harder (1). Internationally 40-50 % of graduating medical students are expected to become general practitioners to meet the increasing population of elderly and complex patients but studies have shown that as low as 14 % of medical students choose to become general practitioners (2-4).

Several studies have shown that there are several influencing factors attracting medical students to the specialty of general practice. Among these are the work-life balance, the opportunity to see the same patients several times and the role models of general practitioners they have encountered either through clerkships in general practice, family members or their own general practitioner (2,5-7). Also, the short training time to become a general practitioner has been highlighted as a positive factor by some medical students (7). Furthermore, the specialty is regarded by several of the medical students, both those choosing general practice and their classmates choosing other specialties, as challenging and varied (8). General practice clerkships are used in several medical schools as part of the medical students' clinical rotation. Studies have shown that these clerkships can enhance the probability of the medical students choosing general practice as a career (4,9). Also, long placements leave a greater impact than short, as the medical students have a better opportunity to experience positive role models and a better chance to achieve a more accurate view of general practice (4,10,11).

Yet, some of the factors making general practice favourable for some medical students also deemed the specialty unfavourable for others (7). These factors among others were the short training time, the pressured consultation time due to many patients, the lessened opportunity to do research and the smaller salary (7). Many medical students had experienced multiple hospital doctors and staff talking badly about the specialty of general practice (2,7,12). Furthermore, an uninspiring or burnt-out general practitioner tutor encountered in general practice clerkship persuaded many medical students that general practice was a difficult and less rewarding specialty (6). Additionally, many medical schools favour a curriculum which is mostly hospital based, and it has been described how medical students did not feel, that they had a lot of relevant knowledge when entering clerkships in general practice (7,8,13)

The amount of curriculum related to general practice and the proportion of time of clinical rotation spent in general practice differ greatly between countries and even between medical schools in the same country (4,6,14). At the University of Helsinki, medical students have general practice courses during all four years of medical school(8). In the United Kingdom, some medical students have limited time in general practice compared to the amount of time spent in hospital, while others spend a weekly day in general practice during their third year of medical school (4,6). Furthermore, studies have shown that placing general practice clerkships in both the first and last year of medical school increased the medical students' desire to pursue a career in general practice (15). As mentioned earlier, the length of the clerkship in clinical rotation also influences on the intention of pursuing a career in this specialty. Likewise, a longer clerkship in general practice had greater positive impact in the medical students' intention to choose this career than a short clerkship (4).

Several studies have also shown that the placement of clerkships in general practice leave different impact, whether they are placed early or late in the medical students' education (16). The studies showed that early clerkships in general practice left a greater impact on the medical students, as the percentage of students interested in general practice increased after the early clerkship. On the other

hand, when the medical students were interviewed after clerkships placed later in their clinical rotation, they had changed their mind regarding their intention to pursue a career in general practice. Yet, there could not be found a certain reason for this outcome as the study did not conclude whether it was the lack of continued exposure of general practice or the continued exposure of specialty medicine in hospital that changed the medical students' intentions (16).

Even in Denmark, the four medical schools organize their curriculum differently. The proportion of time of the clinical rotation in general practice varies from eight to fifteen days (17). Furthermore, whether the placement of the clerkship in general practice is early, late or both in the medical education also differs. At Aarhus, Copenhagen and Syddansk University, the clerkships are placed during the last semester of the medical education. In contrast, half of it is placed during the first two semesters and the other half is placed during the last semester at the medical school in Aalborg. Placing clerkship in general practice in early semesters of the medical education has the advantage of making the medical students more acquainted with the specialty, and thereby giving them more time to consider this specialty before choosing a career path (16).

## Aim

In a Danish context little is known about whether the placement of general practice clerkship early or late in the medical education has any importance regarding the influence of the medical students' choice of a general practice career. Therefore, this study aims to explore how the experience of early general practice clerkships affect the medical students' perception of the work of the general practitioner.

## Method

### Participants and design

The study was designed as a qualitative study based on semi-structured interviews. The study was conducted at Aalborg University, where fourth-year students, who had completed their first clerkship in general practice, were recruited through their class Facebook group and through class attendance of the principal researcher of this study. During the fourth year of medical school, the medical students had eight days of clerkship in general practice throughout which they both had consultations on their own and consultations observed by the general practitioner. The medical students had five days with lessons about general practice alongside the clerkship.

### Interviews

Individual interviews were conducted after the completion of the clerkships in general practice using an interview guide prepared in advance (18). To explore the aim, three research questions were raised (see table 1) and these were further subdivided into a series of interview questions.

**Table 1: Research questions used in the interview guide**

What is the medical students' experience of the work of the general practitioner during the medical students' general practice clerkships?	How does the experience of clerkships in general practice clerkships affect the medical students' perception of the work of the general practitioner?	Do you want to become a GP yourself?
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This was done to cover the aim by different angles. When the interview guide was finished, two pilot interviews were conducted. The pilot interviews were used to test the interview guide and to estimate the time needed to perform each interview. Furthermore, the pilot interviews gave the researcher opportunity to learn the techniques of semi-structured interviews.

The semi-structured interviews were audio recorded. After the interviews, the audio-recordings were transcribed verbatim by the principal researcher. Topics discussed in the interviews were patient categories that the medical students encountered as well as the knowledge of the general practitioner compared to other specialties among other things.

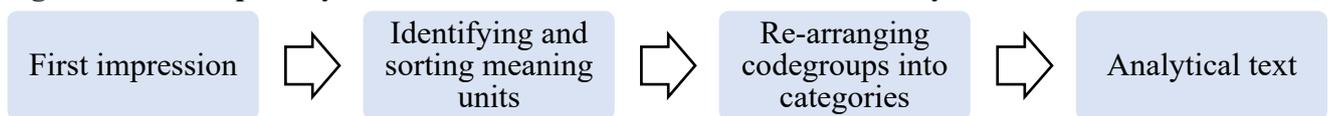
### Ethics

The author of this article received informed consent and participation was voluntary. The interviews were conducted according to the Helsinki declaration. All data was stored following GDPR. The participants were pseudonymized in the data.

### Data analysis

The data was analysed using systematic text condensation as an approach (19). In systematic text condensation the data analysis is traditionally divided into four steps (see figure 1).

**Figure 1: The steps of systematic text condensation used in this study**



The first step included reading through all transcriptions. This was done to get an overview of the experiences of the medical students during their clerkships in general practice and to identify preliminary themes. The second step included identifying meaning units related to the research questions. The meaning units were gathered under code groups. During the second step, the code groups were changed several times. The third step was used to extract code groups and rearrange them into new categories closely related to the research question. This resulted in eight code groups representing three themes (see table 2). The fourth step consisted of writing analytical text based on the code groups. The text was supported by quotations.

**Table 2: Themes and code groups found in step 3**

Perception of the general practitioners' work <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Psychiatry in general practice</li> <li>• Change in the perception of the general practitioner's work</li> <li>• Unknown work tasks</li> </ul>	The professional life of the general practitioner <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The diversity of general practice</li> <li>• Different types of consultations</li> <li>• The organization of general practice</li> </ul>	The relationship between general practitioner and patient <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The doctor's role in the patient's life</li> <li>• The doctor's function in the patient's life</li> </ul>
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### Results

Seven fourth-year medical students participated in the semi-structured interviews that lasted from 14 to 25 minutes. The participants consisted of three male and four female medical students, and their ages varied from 23 to 33 years.

The medical students' likelihood to choose general practice as their specialty before and after the clerkship, can be seen below (see table 3).

**Table 3: The medical students' likelihood to choose general practice as their specialty**

Participant number	Before the clerkship	After the clerkship
Participant 1	Unlikely	More likely
Participant 2	Unlikely	More likely
Participant 3	Unlikely	More likely
Participant 4	Unlikely	More likely
Participant 5	More likely	More likely
Participant 6	More likely	More likely
Participant 7	More likely	More likely

The data analysis resulted in three themes, which were perception of the general practitioners' work, the professional life of the general practitioner and the relationship between general practitioner and patient.

#### Perception of the general practitioners' work

Several medical students described how, when they saw patients on their own, the patients mostly presented orthopaedic issues, gastrointestinal problems, different kinds of infections and dermatitis. When the medical students were observing the general practitioner during his/her consultations, it quickly became clear that the general practitioner dealt with a wider diversity of patients. This took the medical students by surprise. A big part of the surprise was the amount of time psychiatry and psychiatric patients took up in general practice. This could be anything from patients attending the general practitioner with suspicion about a depression to conversational therapy. Furthermore, some medical students realized that treatment did not necessarily need to be prescribed medicine but that conversational therapy could also be a treatment for some patients.

*Men det egentligt også er gået op for mig, at det er en anden måde at være læge på. At der er patienter, der egentligt bare har mentalt brug for at snakke med en læge, at det er lige så meget medicin, som at kunne give en patient med en infektion en omgang antibiotika. At man på den måde ligesom også kan behandle patienter. Så det er egentligt gået op for mig efter opholdet. (Participant 1)*

Several of the medical students changed their perception of the general practitioners as medical specialists during their clerkships in general practice. Some of the medical students were surprised by the competencies that the general practitioners had. This could be seen in the way the general practitioners passed on their own knowledge and how they handled the patient's problem in 10 to 15 minutes consultations, which was perceived as short consultations by the medical students. One of the medical students highlighted the difference in approach to conversations with the patients, when she compared herself to the general practitioner. It surprised the medical student how relaxed the general practitioner was regarding something that was perceived difficult by the medical student.

*Nu har jeg jo ikke prøvet det, men ikke ville have samme ro, men også måske ville tænke, "At jeg skal prøve at fikse det her på en dag", og de var bare.... Tog det bare det stille og roligt, og "Hvad har du brug for?", og sådan. (Participant 6)*

One medical student thought that the general practitioner mostly dealt with physical illness and examinations related to this, but was surprised to find, that conversational therapy and doctor's certificates were a great part of the general practitioner's work.

*Altså, jeg tror, at jeg blev overrasket over, hvor meget patienterne brugte lægen til ud over det fysiske. At der var så meget samtale, og så meget sådan... altså psykiske problemstillinger eller lægeerklæringer. (Participant 4)*

Another medical student thought before the clerkship that very little treatment could be initiated in general practice and that many of the sicker patients were referred to the hospital for treatment and was pleasantly surprised to be proven wrong.

*Men meget af det, jeg ligesom så i almen praksis var jo... ja, og også bare behandling foretaget i almen praksis af sygdom, og det havde jeg egentligt ikke forventet så meget på den måde. Hvor meget man egentligt kan klare i almen praksis. (Participant 1)*

### The professional life of the general practitioner

Before their clerkships in general practice, the medical students seemed to know a little of the way that general practitioner worked and what kind of consultations he/she had. Some medical students were impressed by the way the general practitioners handled the psychiatric conversations. They thought that the general practitioner's job was to always tell the patient what to do or what kind of medication to take to become better, but sometimes the general practitioner's job was to guide the patient to find the solution that worked best for the individual patient.

*Altså, det der med, at hun kommunikativt fik patienten til selv at indse det, uden at hun faktisk gav hende svaret selv. Det synes jeg var en meget spændende samtale, og patienten brød jo også sammen. (Participant 3)*

Several of the medical students thought that the work of the general practitioner took place in the clinic of the general practitioner. Others knew that some of the work took place outside the clinic, whether it was house calls or visiting the local nursing home. When they went with the general practitioner on house calls, they experienced that, even though the general practitioner still talked with the patients and examined them, it was not the same as in the clinic. It felt more peaceful in the homes of the patients than in the clinic, and it was easier to sense the respect surrounding the general practitioner. Others suspected that not all patients were ill enough to actually need a house call from the general practitioner but that it would be more convenient for the patients than to attend the general practitioner in the clinic.

*Det er jo også sjovt at komme ind i folks hjem, og de respekterer virkelig én, og er meget glade for, at man kommer ud... Så ser man jo også, når de er rigtigt dårlige, og ikke selv kan komme ud, eller om de overhovedet er rigtige dårlige, eller bare tager det som en nem løsning. (Participant 6)*

The medical students had thoughts about the organization of the general practices, where they had their clerkships. Some medical students thought that it was nice that the general practitioner delegated some of the tasks to the nurses, so that the general practitioner could take care of the more complex tasks. The tasks performed by the nurses could be anything from blood samples to annual check-ups of patients with chronic diseases. One medical student, even though appreciating the

extra time the general practitioner received as a bonus from this, thought that for her, as a medical student, it would have been nice to see all the different tasks a general practitioner is expected to be able to perform. The delegation of tasks also gave the opportunity for the general practitioner to be able to leave one's imprint on the organization of the clinic and work with patient categories he/she had a preference for.

*Det at jeg kunne se, at man kan gøre det til sit eget, og specielt hvis du er et større sted, kan du måske lidt vælge, hvad for en patientgruppe du synes, der er fedest at arbejde med. (Participant 3)*

When comparing the atmosphere and the working conditions in the general practice to the same in the hospital, the conditions in general practice seemed more attractive to the medical students than in the hospital. In general practice they sensed that the tone between the different professionals was nicer than in the hospital. In general practice, it was important to make sure that all employees had the breaks they had the right to and during these breaks it was informal talk.

*Vi kom lige fra ortopædkirurgisk..... Det var virkelig presset, og der var ikke den der kultur med at give hinanden pause eller sådan lige.... Man prøvede at lægge op til det, men der er mere en kultur, hvor man tager sig af sig selv, hvor her (i almen praksis, red.) kunne man virkelig mærke den der work-life balance og det der.....kaffepausen kl. 10 skulle håndhæves, og der blev købt brød, og der blev hygget. (Participant 3)*

Others thought that the general practice provided a bigger opportunity to follow the patients for some time, if not most of the patient's life, whereas at the hospital, the medical students often just saw the patient one time and did not know what happened to the patient later.

*Jeg kan godt lide den der med, at man følger patienterne over længere tid, fordi at for eksempel i skadestuen, hvor de bare kommer på sådan et samlebånd. Det er jeg ikke så stor fan af. (Participant 6)*

### The relationship between general practitioner and patient

The medical students entered the clerkships with different ideas about the interaction between general practitioner and the patients. Some of the medical students had experiences from their own general practitioner by which they compared the general practitioner from their clerkship in general practice, while others did not make this comparison.

*Jeg ved ikke, om det har noget at gøre med det sted jeg var også, men det var så meget en familielæge.... det har jeg ikke selv oplevet fra den læge, jeg har personligt.... det(familielægen, red.) blev jeg lidt overrasket over, fordi det har jeg ikke selv oplevet. (Participant 4)*

Another of the medical students reflected on how the general practitioner played a huge role in the life of the patient and was almost a witness to the patient's life like a spouse.

*At det var meget sådan familielægen.... At man bliver sådan lidt et, det ved jeg ikke... et kendt ansigt i byen, og at man bliver et livsvidne lidt ligesom ens hustru eller ens mand eller sådan.... ens fortrolige. (Participant 7)*

As one of the medical students pointed out many patients regard their general practitioner as an authoritarian person, and this might not always be easy for the general practitioner himself to see.

*Hvor meget der også bliver stolet på lægen. Man har virkelig en autoritær rolle, specielt når du står som almen praktiserende læge. Det er jo din læge, eller sådan. (Participant 3)*

## Discussion

This study investigated medical students' experiences during clerkships in general practice and how it affected their view on the work of the general practitioner. Many of the medical students were surprised by the amount of time the general practitioners used on psychiatric patients. A reason for this surprise could be that meeting psychiatric patients during their clerkship in general practice is the first time the medical students encounter this patient category, as the clerkship in psychiatry is placed later in their clinical rotation. Furthermore, some of the medical students had not given much thought to house calls or visits at the local nursing home prior to the clerkships. The reason for this could be that the medical students had not experienced doctors at other locations than hospitals and that the medical students were unfamiliar with home visits. Clerkship in general practice also made the medical students acquainted with areas of the work as a doctor that they would not see otherwise.

The clerkship gave the medical students greater insight into the lives of the general practitioners. This resulted in better understanding of the organization of the clinic and the types of consultations the general practitioner could have. The medical students were left with the impression that general practice is easier to accommodate to one's preferences than hospital life is. In other studies (2), the medical students often valued the higher specialization of hospital specialties more than the opportunity to create a good work-life balance, but this was not the case in this study.

Before the clerkship in general practice, three of the participants had considered the specialty as a possible career choice and the clerkship did not change their decision. The remaining four medical students had not considered the specialty as a career choice before the clerkship, but they now considered it a possibility because of the clerkship. However, none of the students became dead set on general practice as their primary career choice after the clerkship, but they seemed more likely to consider it a possibility after the clerkship thereby being somewhat influenced by the clerkship. Other studies have also found that medical students may be more inclined to choose general practice as a career choice after an early clerkship but that experiences, both in and out of the hospital, later in their education is more influencing (16,20). One might assume that the clerkships placed at different stages in the medical education would increase the percentage of medical students choosing a career in general practice, as a prolonged exposure to a specialty increases the chance of choosing it (15).

Yet, the amount of time spent in general practice clerkship also influences the decision to choose this specialty. Other medical schools have seen an increase in medical students choosing the specialty as general practice because of longer clerkships in general practice (21).

Even though this study cannot say whether the early clerkship in general practice convinces the medical students to choose this specialty as their career path, it highlights some of the important aspects of career choice. Among other aspects the clerkship gives the medical students a nuanced acquaintance with general practice. This was achieved through the meeting with role models in the general practice, the opportunity to meet more diverse patient categories when following the general practitioner and insight into the work-life balance of general practitioners. These aspects can also be found in other studies (22).

### Strengths and limitations of the study

One of the strengths of this study was that all participants came from Aalborg University, thereby making the study more representative for medical students attending this university, as all medical students were educated in the same curriculum. Another strength is that all participants had clerkships in general practice during the same semester of their education and that all interviews were conducted immediately after the end of their clerkship. However, the fact that the participants only represented Aalborg University does not make the study representative to medical students from other universities in Denmark, as the medical education in Aalborg varies greatly from the other universities in terms of amount of time in clinical rotation. On the other hand, the medical students are introduced to the specialty earlier at Aalborg University because of the early clerkship. Another limitation of this study was the low number of participants and the short duration of the interviews. As most medical students find themselves very busy with their clinical rotations, study load etc., it was difficult to recruit participants to the interviews. Thus, several potential participants expressed worries about the amount of time the interview would take which could be an explanation to the difficulties with recruiting participants. Due to the timeframe of this study, it was not possible to interview the participants both before and after their clerkships in general practice.

### Perspective

The medical students expressed surprise at some of the work of the general practitioners in particular the number of psychiatric patients. As the medical students at Aalborg University also have a clerkship in general practice during the last year of the education, one might assume that the medical students do not become surprised by the psychiatric patients here, as they have met them during their fifth year of medical school.

As more medical students choose a career in general practice because of longer clerkships, it could attract more doctors to the specialty, if the clerkships in general practice became longer. Furthermore, several studies show that the earlier the medical students are introduced to general practice the longer they know about the specialty before choosing their own, giving them a bigger opportunity to consider general practice as a possible specialty.

### Recommendations to future research

It could be interesting to interview the medical students both before and after their clerkship in general practice, as it would be easier to see exactly, how their perception of the work of the general practitioner changed.

Furthermore, it could be interesting to repeat the study, when the same medical students had had their sixth-year clerkship in general practice to see, if they have the same intentions to pursue general practice as a career as after the clerkship during their fourth year.

### Conclusion

Early clerkships in general practice have the potential to attract medical students to a general practice career as it provides the medical students with a valuable insight into the working lives of the general practitioners. Although we did not find that the early clerkship in general practice convinced the medical students to pursue a career in general practice, the clerkships made the medical students familiar with the characteristics of the specialty and made them consider general practice as specialty choice. This knowledge is expected to be relevant to universities, general practitioners, as and other planners of medical education.

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