

Postgraduate Education Around the World

The changing face of medical education in France

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Medical education in France takes place in the 'Unités d'Enseignement et de Recherche des Sciences médicales' (UER). These are part of the universities, there being thirteen in Paris and a large number in the provinces. The curriculum is divided into three parts or cycles. The first cycle gives a grounding of the basic medical sciences and lasts two years with a competitive examination at the end of the first year. The second cycle lasts four years and includes theoretical teaching and clinical attachments with examinations throughout. The third cycle commences with a period of six months internship above. The 'internat de spécialité' for streams.

The 'internat de médecine' for the general practitioner lasts two years including the six month internship above. The 'internat de spécialité' for those specialising in hospital medicine, public health or medical research lasts a minimum of four years and entry is through a highly competitive examination. The final diploma of 'Docteur en Médecine', in both streams, can only be obtained after submitting a short thesis.

In 1985 there was a reform of the third cycle. The aim was to raise the status of the general practitioner and to limit the growth of specialist training places because of increasing difficulties in specialists finding placement at the end of training.

Entry to the third cycle occurs after passing an examination in clinical medicine and therapeutics in June and September. Then follows a common six-month internship during which there is continuing theoretical education and practical apprenticeship counting towards the accreditation needed for the diploma at the end of the third cycle.

The theoretical education is planned by the university councils and the training posts are organised

by the 'directeur régional des affaires sanitaires et sociales' (DRASS). The posts are linked to a regional hospital affiliated to a university, - centre hospitalier régional (CHR).

General practitioner training

To improve the status of general practitioners the training during the third cycle has been improved by planning, involving university and hospital doctors, general practitioners, members of the French medical unions, le Collège National des Généralistes Enseignants (somewhat similar to our Royal College of General Practitioners) and UNAFORMEC (Union Nationale des Associations de Formation Médicale Continue).

The vocational training period lasts two years which includes the initial six month common internship at the start of the third cycle. The remaining eighteen months may include a period spent in research but the major development has been the involvement of approved general practitioners as trainers. The interns are attached to approved trainers for their extra-hospital general practice apprenticeship. This involvement of general practitioners in the university training schedule appears in some places to have led to a certain amount of friction. I was impressed by the enthusiasm of the French general practitioner trainers in their new role but it has been suggested by certain university doctors that perhaps the general practitioners themselves should rotate back through the third cycle to use it as a refresher course.

Specialist training

Entry into the specialist training streams is by a highly competitive examination taken at the end of the six-month common internship. Specialist train-

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ing lasts at least four to five years depending on the individual speciality. There are now three main specialist groups. These are medical research, public health and the medical/surgical specialties which includes four subdivisions, namely internal medicine, surgery, medical biology and psychiatry.

Medical specialisation

Depending on their ranking in the competitive examination and their preference the successful candidate will be assigned to training posts. If, because of military service, the intern is unable to take up his post then he will have preference in front of an equally ranked candidate when he returns to his period of specialist training. DRASS matches the applicants with the number of posts available, enabling a tighter control to be exerted over training posts. The aim is to prevent an imbalance in the number of specialists in any particular sub-specialty relative to the needs of the public in the various geographical regions. It also enables the trainee to plan better for the future by removing career uncertainty.

The general organisation of the specialist training is aimed to permit the development of the individual to a high level of expertise by means of a multidisciplinary approach. This includes six-monthly rotational attachments to different hospital units. At least six months must be spent outside a regional university hospital. Work in a research unit or overseas is eligible for accreditation.

At the end of each six month period an assessment of the trainee is made by the university assessor. The training and continual assessment leads to the DES (le diplôme d'études spécialisés). The contents of the curriculum and the practical training periods for the DES are fixed by the Ministers of Health and Education in consultation with the universities. The interns must enrol for the DES examination, at the latest, after two and a half years of the training period.

Public health

Public pressure has increased governmental interest in preventative medicine. This has led to the creation of a specialist stream in public health. Training in this stream involves interaction between

the clinicians and governmental organisations implying links with non-medical personnel such as economists and sociologists. This increased accent on public health is also aimed at increasing the participation of general practitioners and specialists in preventative medicine.

Medical research

This stream represents, like the public health stream, a new concept responding to a perceived need to establish a link between physicians and non-medical researchers in the life sciences, the aim being to produce a cadre of researchers with a good clinical background and scientific education to take up posts in public research organisations. This particularly applies to the industrial sector, notably biomedical research which is developing rapidly.

Training is organised into two six month periods in clinical medicine and three one year periods in approved research laboratories which can be held consecutively in the same establishment. After two and a half years in this stage a year may be spent overseas in a research unit.

The future

A number of interesting developments are planned for the future. Associated with the reform of the third cycle of French medical education there is an increasing desire to develop postgraduate education at this stage. The idea is to commence the process of continuing postgraduate education during this third cycle to maintain the practitioners' enthusiasm, particularly that of general practitioners. Linked to this idea is the realisation of the need to assess the effectiveness of new teaching methods and develop trained medical educators to improve communication with other members of the profession and the general public.

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