Current Status of Scientific Research Accomplishments of Senior Eight-year-program Medical Students in China: A Multicenter Cross-sectional Questionnaire-based Study

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Abstract

Backgrounds: Among the distinct medical education systems in China, the eight-year program is an elite program dedicated to cultivating physician scientists. Although the research ability of senior students in eight-year medical programs is a pivotal quality, it remains unclear. This study aimed to clarify the current status and challenges of students' research experience, abilities and outputs.

Methods: A multicenter cross-sectional study was conducted in five medical schools in northern China. Electronic questionnaires were sent to 235 randomly chosen fifth-grade or sixth-grade eight-year-program medical students. A total of 211 responses were collected and analyzed using SPSS 22.0.

Results: Only 13.3% of participants chose research as their future career goal. Students generally felt that conducting research was stressful and difficult. The greatest obstacle was a lack of time due to heavy workloads. The two major motivations for research were graduation and future employment (75.8%) and research interest (24.2%). More than half of the students (142, 67.3%) had research experience by the time of the survey, among whom 84 students already had research outputs. A higher proportion of students with outputs was motivated by the requirements for graduation or employment compared to students without outputs (71.4% vs. 55.2%, $P = 0.046$).

Conclusions: Senior eight-year-program medical students in China generally had high pressure to conduct research and devoted their efforts to overcome these challenges. More guidance and novel encouragement to enhance students' initiative and interest in research could be provided by medical schools and educators in the future.

Background

Evidence-based medicine has become the center of clinical practice, and physician scientists play a critical role in raising scientific questions and updating clinical evidence [1, 2]. To satisfy the increasing demand for physician scientists who can promote the progress of modern medical science, medical schools worldwide are designing research courses or programs to encourage students to engage in research training. Guided by the Healthy China 2030 target, China has launched reforms in medical education with the aim of strengthening the professional and comprehensive abilities of medical staffs [3, 4].

In contrast to many Western countries, there are currently several distinct training systems for medical students in China. The majority of the systems are shown in Additional File 1. Among them, the eight-year medical program is an elite program dedicated to cultivating clinicians with research abilities [5]. Research ability has become one of the pivotal qualities in the evaluation system [2]. However, the present situation is still not satisfactory and involves many unmet needs, including insufficient research training and difficulty in balancing the overwhelming clinical courses and research work [2, 5-7]. Our previous study indicated that senior eight-year-program students from Peking Union Medical College generally had a low level of self-evaluation of their research abilities [7].

Although much attention has been paid to medical education and research training in recent years, studies exploring the progress and research abilities of Chinese medical students are still limited. Eight-year medical program students usually finish theoretical learning and begin internships in the fifth or sixth year. Therefore, we conducted this multicenter cross-sectional study among eight-year-program medical students in this stage from five medical schools in China in an attempt to clarify the current conditions of students' research experience, abilities, and outputs and to explore the possible influential factors for research outputs.

Methods

Study population

This study was approved by the Medical Review Ethics Committee of Peking Union Medical College Hospital. Figure 1 shows the flow diagram of this study. A multicenter cross-sectional study was conducted among senior medical students from the eight-year programs of five medical schools in northern China, including Peking Union Medical College (PUMC), Tsinghua University (THU), Peking University (PKU), Qingdao University (QU), and Xi'an Jiaotong University (XJTU). First, the name list of all students in the fifth and sixth grades and the teaching curriculums in five schools were collected. Based on the overall number of students, 30 from each grade in PUMC, PKU and QU and 20 from each grade in XJTU were randomly chosen among all currently enrolled students using computer-generated random numbers. Because students in the fifth grade in THU were receiving scientific research training abroad during the survey [8], only 15 students in the sixth grade were included.

Questionnaire design

The questionnaire was designed, distributed and collected electronically to every participant with the wjx online survey platform (Changsha Ranxing Information Technology Co., Ltd., Changsha, P.R.C.). The survey was anonymous, and it was fully voluntary for each participant to respond or not respond to the questions. The questionnaire collection lasted from October 7th, 2019, to November 11th, 2019, and the ideal response rate was set at 70% and above for any center. The ultimate response rate was 89.8% (211/235), with a range from 70% to 100% among these schools. The composition of the enrolled participants is shown in Figure 2. The questionnaire consisted of the following aspects: (A) demographics, (B) future professional plans, (C) research experience, (D) motivations for research, and (E) research outputs. All students were asked to evaluate the difficulty of and pressure for research, with 0 points meaning no difficulty/pressure and 5 points meaning unbearable difficulty/pressure. Students were classified into two subgroups based on their research experience, and students with research experience were further categorized into a group with research outputs and a group without research outputs, defined as paper publications and successful application for research funding. For details of the English version of the complete questionnaire, please see Additional File 2.

Statistical analysis

Data were exported to an Excel table and analyzed mainly with descriptive methods. The continuous variables with normalized distributions were presented as the mean standard deviation ( ), and Student's *t* test was used for comparisons between two groups. Continuous variables with a non-normal distribution were presented as the median (range), and the Wilcoxon test was used for the comparison of two groups. A chi-square or Fisher's exact test was adopted for the comparison of categorical variables. A two-tailed *P* value of < 0.05 was considered significant. All statistical analyses were performed using SPSS 22.0 for Windows (IBM, USA).

Results

Baseline characteristics of participants

Table 1 shows the characteristics of 211 students. A total of 104 (49.3%) students were from the fifth grade, and 107 (50.7%) were from the sixth grade. Female students (131) accounted for 62.1%. The average age was 22.7 0.9 years. A total of 209 (99.1%) students chose clinical doctor as one of their career goals. However, only 28 (13.3%) students also wanted to become a researcher, and 28 (13.3%) wanted to become a medical educator.

Table 1 Characteristics of the medical students

	Total	With research experience	No research experience	<i>P value</i>
Number, n	211	142	69	
Male, n (%)	80 (37.9%)	55 (38.7%)	25 (36.2%)	0.725
Age ( )	22.69 0.93	22.70 0.92	22.68 0.96	0.909
Fifth grade, n (%)	104 (49.3%)	64 (45.1%)	40 (58.0%)	0.079
Professional plan (multiple choices)				
Clinical doctors	209	140	69	0.323
Researchers	28	22	6	0.172
Medical teachers	27	18	9	0.940
Others	18	15	3	0.109
Difficulties, median (range)	4 (0-5)	4 (0-5)	4 (0-5)	0.274
Pressure, median (range)	3 (0-5)	3 (0-5)	3 (0-5)	0.538
Motivations, n (%)				0.331
For graduation or employment	160 (75.8%)	106 (74.6%)	54 (78.3%)	
Interests	51 (24.2%)	36 (25.4%)	15 (21.7%)	
Obstacles for research (multiple choices)				
Heavy load from study or internship	153	107	46	0.185
Insufficient research abilities	86	64	22	0.067
No suitable research groups	45	29	16	0.645
No help	54	26	28	0.001
No clear targets	79	53	26	0.040
Ideal time to begin research, n (%)				□ 0.001
Premedical period	53 (25.1%)	42 (29.6%)	11 (15.9%)	
Medical courses	125 (59.2%)	86 (60.6%)	39 (56.5%)	
Internship		14 (9.9%)	19 (27.5%)	

Research ability weaknesses (multiple choices)				
Experimental design	112	75	37	0.912
Statistical analysis	103	73	30	0.280
Academic writing	77	53	24	0.719
Experimental skills	66	44	22	0.895
Literature research and reading	64	39	25	0.194

Pressures and obstacles

Students felt high pressure for research, with a median score of 3 (0-5), and had difficulty doing research, with a median score of 4 (0-5). The major pressure came from concern about graduation and future employment (75.8%), which was also the pivotal motivation to conduct research among 160 (75.8%) students. Only 51 (24.2%) students chose research interest as their pivotal motivation.

The major obstacles or challenges to conducting research were as follows: heavy load from study or internship (153, 72.5%), insufficient research abilities (86, 40.8%), and lack of access to the appropriate research team (45, 21.3%). With regard to research abilities, students hoped to improve their abilities in research design (112, 53.1%), statistical analysis (103, 48.8%), academic writing (77, 36.5%), and experiment skills (66, 31.3%). A total of 125 (59.2%) students suggested that the ideal time for starting research was the semesters when they took basic and clinical medical courses.

Research experience

Table 2 shows the students' research experience. In total, 142 (67.3%) students had previous research experience, including 120 (84.5%) who participated in one or two research projects and 22 (15.5%) who participated in three or more research programs. Among students with research experience, 69 (48.6%) had undertaken one or more research projects as the first applicant. Furthermore, 19 (13.4%) students had applied for nation-funded projects, 10 (7.0%) for province-funded projects and 25 (17.6%) for school-funded projects. Most students' research topics (118, 83.1%) were provided by their mentors. A total of 121 (85.2%), 117 (82.4%), and 96 (67.6%) students received research training in basic bioscience teams, clinical research teams, and both types of teams, respectively. Eighty-four (59.2%) students began research training in the third and fourth grades. A total of 123 (86.6%) students had a fixed research mentor. Forty-five (31.7%) spent 5 to 10 hours per week on research activities (including attending a seminar, literature reading, doing experiments, and academic writing), and 31 (21.8%) spent 10-20 hours per week.

However, 69 (32.7%) students had no research experience by the survey time. Among them, 16 (23.2%) already had a research plan, and 52 (75.4%) were willing to conduct research. The reason they had not started research training was mainly time restriction due to a heavy load from courses or clinical work (66.7%, 46/69).

In the comparison between students with and without research experience, there was no difference in demographics, scores in pressure and difficulty, and motivation. However, students with research experience preferred the earlier beginning time for research training ($P 0.001$). The proportion of students who preferred the premedical period as an ideal beginning time for research was 29.6% among students with research experience and 15.9% among students without research experience.

Table 2 Characteristics of medical students with research outputs and associated factors

Variables	Numbers and percentage			
	Total (n=142)	With outputs (n=84)	Without outputs (n=58)	P value
Age ( )	22.70 0.92	22.70 0.92	22.69 0.94	0.936
Gender (male), n (%)	55 (38.7%)	33 (39.3%)	22 (37.9%)	0.871
Grade (5 th grade), n (%)	64 (45.1%)	37 (44.0%)	27 (46.0%)	0.768
School*	39 (27.5%)	24 (28.6%)	15 (25.9%)	0.839
PUMC	35 (24.6%)	21 (25.0%)	14 (24.1%)	
PKU	21 (14.8%)	14 (24.1%)	11 (19.0%)	
QU	14 (9.9%)	9 (10.7%)	5 (8.6%)	
THU	33 (23.2%)	20 (23.8%)	13 (22.4%)	
XJTU				
Begin time for scientific research training				0.337
1 st -2 nd year	33 (23.2%)	23 (27.4%)	10 (17.2%)	
3 rd -4 th year	84 (59.2%)	48 (57.1%)	36 (62.1%)	
5 th - 6 th year	25 (17.6%)	13 (15.5%)	12 (20.7%)	
Average hours dedicated to research a week				0.172
over 20hrs	12 (8.5%)	9 (10.7%)	3 (5.2%)	
10-20hrs	31 (21.8%)	20 (23.8%)	11 (19.0%)	
5-10hrs	45 (31.7%)	25 (29.8%)	20 (34.5%)	
0-5hrs	42 (29.6%)	25 (29.8%)	17 (29.3%)	
nearly no time	12 (8.5%)	5 (6.0%)	7 (12.1%)	
Having fixed research mentor	123 (86.6%)	75 (89.3%)	48 (82.8%)	0.261
Feelings for obstacles during research work				0.827
Avoiding or/and anxious	97 (66.2%)	55 (65.5%)	39 (67.2%)	
Peaceful or/and excited	48 (33.8%)	29 (34.5%)	19 (32.8%)	
Scoring difficulty for research, median (range)	4 (0-5)	4 (0-5)	4 (0-5)	0.995

Scoring pressure for research, median (range)	3 (0-5)	3 (0-5)	3 (0-5)	0.205
Motivations for research				0.046
Graduation or/and employment	92 (64.8%)	60 (71.4%)	32 (55.2%)	
Interests in research or/and knowledge	50 (35.2%)	24 (28.6%)	26 (44.8%)	

* PUMC: Peking Union Medical College, PKU: Peking University, QU: Qingdao University, THU: Medical Doctor Program of Tsinghua University, XJTU: Xi'an Jiaotong University

Research outputs and the associated factors

Among students with research experience, 84 (59.2%) students had research outputs that included paper publications and successful applications for research funding. Forty-one students (28.9%) had one or more articles published or accepted by medical or biological journals, with 35 of them as the first author or coauthor. The most common type of publication was an original article.

Compared with the group without research outputs, students with outputs were more likely to consider graduation and future employment as their original motivation for research (71.4% vs. 55.2%, $P = 0.046$). Furthermore, students motivated by graduation or employment requirements generally scored higher for pressure than students motivated by interest (median vs. median: 3.5 vs. 3, $P=0.030$). There was no difference in grade, school, percentage with fixed mentors, beginning time for research, average weekly time spent on research, or attitude towards obstacles between the two groups.

Discussion

In 1919, the first eight-year medical program in China was founded at Peking Union Medical College. Since 2001, more eight-year medical programs have been established as elite medical education programs in highly ranked medical schools in China. Research ability has been one of the pivotal abilities of these eight-year-program students. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first multicenter survey to focus on research ability among eight-year-program medical students in China. This study indicated that almost all students would like to be clinical doctors, and only 13.3% wanted to be physician scientists or to engage in research for their future career. The majority of them felt moderate to high pressure and found it difficult to conduct research. Concern about graduation and future employment was the leading motivation for research, and a heavy load from study or internship was the major obstacle. Fortunately, many students already had research experience and research outputs. A higher percentage of students with research outputs considered graduation and future employment as their original motivation for research compared with students without research outputs.

The modern medical education system has been engaging medical students in research for nearly half a century, and students' feedback has been generally positive in the USA [9-11]. Research training provides valuable experience for medical students, cultivating their interest in research and allowing them to critically evaluate new research findings and advanced medical knowledge [13-15]. Brancati *et al.* found that career achievement was related to research experience in medical school [16]. China has also made great efforts to cultivate physicians' research abilities [2, 12]. The findings of our survey indicate that most of the senior eight-year-program medical students recognized the importance of research abilities and actively participated in research. The majority of participants had either begun research or hoped to begin soon by the time of survey. However, only 13.3% of them wanted to become physician scientists or researchers, which was relatively lower than students in Western countries [17-19]. We believe that at least two factors might contribute to the difference. The first is the low proportion of students in this study taking the interest in research as their motivation. The second is the probable misunderstanding of the definition of physician scientists, whose research scope includes clinical, basic science and translational research [20]. Some students might have thought that only physicians who conduct basic science research could be referred to physician scientists.

The major obstacle found in this research was the heavy load from studies or internships, which corresponds with previous results [4, 7]. The most deficient research abilities were research design and statistical analysis, which was also consistent with other studies [24, 25]. Students performed relatively better in academic reading and writing, probably because the five medical schools in this study all provided related compulsory courses. A Canadian study showed medical students' desire for a formalized research curriculum, centralized opportunities, and more help from experienced researchers [26]. Given the major obstacles and the special abilities these students are eager to improve, adjustments for the curriculum are essential and urgent. For example, early involvement in research, summer or winter research camps, early mentorship arrangements, special research years, and extracurricular workshops focusing on research design and statistical analysis could all be optimal choices. Tsinghua University has already assigned 2 years for full-time research in its curriculum [8].

More than half of the students with research experience had outputs, either publications or successful research project applications. Compared with our previous study in PUMC [7], students made progress in research productivity. However, very few students independently conceived of their research topics. Almost all students received topics from mentors, senior students or doctors. The motivation for research was the only significant influencing factor, with slightly more students who were driven by the requirements of graduation or employment having outputs. This finding suggests that schools and hospitals have paid increasing attention to research in recent years, which puts pressure on medical students and pushes them forward. However, students are expected to play a more active role in research training, which means that other stimulations might be needed.

Previous surveys have seldom focused solely on eight-year-program medical students in China. Although this multicenter study did not involve all eight-year medical programs in China, it surveyed five medical schools in northern China and could partly show the current status and challenges of their research

accomplishment. The difference in curriculums among these five centers, which might introduce bias to the results, is not our focus in this study. To improve the response rate of the survey, there was no request for exact information about the participants' publications or grants, which resulted in a lack of validation of their research outputs. In addition, the online questionnaire survey may decrease authenticity. Future studies could design in-person interviews to explore students' attitudes and comments on research training more deeply.

Conclusions

Senior eight-year-program medical students in China generally feel high pressure for research and devote their efforts to overcome these challenges. More guidance and novel encouragement to enhance students' initiative and interest in research could be provided by medical schools and educators in the future. Potential measures, including adjustments to the curriculum and education reform programs, might facilitate the goal of cultivating elite physician scientists.

Abbreviations

PUMC: Peking Union Medical College

PKU: Peking University

QU: Qingdao University

THU: Tsinghua University

XJTU: Xi'an Jiaotong University

Declarations

Ethics approval and consent to participate: This study was approved by the Medical Review Ethics Committee of Peking Union Medical College Hospital. Because the survey was anonymously and the participants' information was not identifiable, the verbal informed consent from all the participants before the survey was obtained, which was approved by Medical Review Ethics Committee of Peking Union Medical College Hospital. And no participant under 16 years old was involved.

Consent for publication: Not applicable.

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Figures

Figure 1

Flow chart of this study.

Figure 2

Composition of the students surveyed. * PUMC: Peking Union Medical College, PKU: Peking University, QU: Qingdao University, THU: Tsinghua University, XJTU: Xi'an Jiaotong University.