

Perception of Community Medicine as a subject and career preference among undergraduates

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ABSTRACT

Background

Community Medicine (CM) teaches undergraduates about the needs of both healthy and unhealthy individuals as well as how to plan and administer healthcare services. Undergraduate students benefit greatly from a curriculum that integrates comprehensive health care with community engagement, prevention, and health promotion.

Objective

The objective of this study is to assess the perception of undergraduate medical students and interns regarding community medicine as a subject and as a career option.

Methodology

An observational cross-sectional study was conducted between April and November 2024 among undergraduate medical students and interns at ACSR Government Medical College, Nellore, using purposive sampling method. Predesigned, pretested self-administered structured questionnaire (Google form) was used as a data collection tool for data collection.

Results

Out of 700 students who participated in the study, 357 (51%) were females and 343 (49%) were males. The majority, 87 (69.6%), were from urban areas. 598 (85.4%), students understood the concept of community medicine, 612 (87.4%) of them feel that community medicine has improved their problem-solving skill. 687 (98.1%) students feel that the knowledge and experiences will be useful for their career as a doctor and 483 (69%) feel that preventive medicine is better than curative medicine. Only 128 (18.3%) students consider pursuing community medicine as a career option due to low income and few opportunities of treating patients.

Conclusion

Students understood the concept and relevance of community medicine; however, they did not choose it as a future career option.

Keywords: Community medicine, undergraduates

GJMEDPH 2025; Vol. 14, issue 2 | OPEN ACCESS

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Conflict of Interest—none | Funding—none

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INTRODUCTION

Community Medicine (CM) has a prominent role in the journey of a medical student. It helps them understand the importance of promotive, preventive care over curative and rehabilitative care ⁽¹⁾. The CM department not only acts as an educator but also guide medical students with a foundation in value-based education, moulding them into primary care doctors ⁽²⁾. Medical students should be trained in planning, implementation, coordination, monitoring, and evaluation of health programs & research. There is growing global recognition of the benefits of preventive care, the clinical environment and the role models within it often emphasize the immediate, curative aspects of medicine. Addressing this imbalance may require systemic changes, including reallocation of resources toward prevention and enhanced faculty development programs that encourage clinicians to model a balanced, holistic approach to patient care. ^(3,4)

In 2009 an expert committee convened by WHO in South-East Asia stressed that in order to solve public health problems, medical graduates need to be equipped with specific public health competencies. These competencies include health promotion, specific protection, cost-effective interventions, and follow-up ⁽⁵⁾. The shift toward preventive medicine has highlighted the critical role of community-based medical education. Despite its growing importance in addressing chronic diseases, environmental factors, and social determinants of health, community medicine often remains underappreciated both as a subject and a career path among medical students. Traditional curricula and career incentives tend to favour hospital-based, curative approaches, leaving a gap in the training of future physicians who are equipped for public health and community engagement ⁽⁶⁾. As the healthcare system is increasingly emphasizing preventive and community-based approaches, and that community medicine (CM) remains underappreciated as both a subject and a career choice among medical students, the present study was designed to evaluate undergraduate students' perceptions of CM as a discipline and their career preference.

Objectives:

- 1) To assess the perception of undergraduate medical students and interns regarding Community Medicine (CM) as the subject.
- 2) To assess the perception of undergraduate medical students and interns regarding Community Medicine (CM) as a career option.

Methodology:

Study design: An observational cross-sectional study was conducted between April and November 2024 among undergraduate medical students and interns.

Study area: ACSR Government Medical College, Nellore.

Study participants: Undergraduate medical students and interns.

Inclusion criteria:

Students who were willing to participate in the study.

Exclusion criteria:

- Students not willing to participate in the study.
- First-year undergraduates students.
- Incompletely filled forms.

Sample size: All undergraduate medical students and interns at ACSR Government Medical College, Nellore.

Sampling method: Purposive sampling method was used to include all the under graduate students and interns who were willing to participate in the study.

Study Period: April to November 2024

Data collection: After getting clearance from the Institution Research & Scientific Committee and Ethics Committee. predesigned, pretested self-administered structured questionnaire (Google form) was used as a data collection tool for data collection. The questionnaire included the Sociodemographic characteristics of students, Perceptions regarding Community Medicine, and Perception of students about community medicine as career option.

Data Analysis:

Data was analysed by using SPSS version 20. Descriptive data were presented as mean, standard deviation, frequency and percentages.

Results

Sociodemographic details of study participants

The study sample consisted of 700 participants, of whom 525 were MBBS students and 175 were interns. The gender distribution was nearly balanced, with 357 (51%) females and 343 (49%) males. **Table 1 indicates** that a substantial majority

of the study participants were from urban areas (487, 69.6%), with the remaining 212 (30.4%) from rural regions. In terms of parental education, 167 mothers (23.9%) were educated up to degree level, followed by 145 (20.7%) with secondary school education. Among the fathers, 259 (37%) were degree-educated and 253 (36.2%) had postgraduate qualifications.

Table 1: sociodemographic details of study participants

Characteristics	Frequency (%) (N=700)
Gender	
Male	343 (49%)
Female	357 (51%)
Area of residency	
Urban	487 (69.6%)
Rural	213 (30.4%)
Mother education	
Illiterate	67 (9.5%)
Primary education	84 (12%)
Secondary education	145 (20.7%)
Intermediate	113 (16.2%)
Degree	167 (23.9%)
Postgraduation	124 (17.7%)
Father education	
Illiterate	0 (0%)
Primary education	0 (0%)
Secondary education	82 (11.7%)
Intermediate	106 (15.1%)
Degree	259 (37%)
Postgraduation	253 (36.2%)
Any doctor in family	127 (18.2%)

Perception of students regarding Community Medicine as a subject

As shown in **Table 2, About** 598 (85.4%), students understood the concept of community medicine, 675 (96.4%) realized the relevance of community medicine to the real health issues. Among all participants, 612 (87.4%) of them feel that community medicine has improved their problem-solving skill, 687 (98.1%) students feel that the

knowledge and experiences will be useful for their career as a doctor and, 483 (69%) feel that preventive medicine is better than curative medicine. Majority of students, 546 (78%) feel biostatistics is relevant in medical education, while 603 (86.1%) feel that time allotted to community medicine is more. However, 438 (62.6%) of them thought that community medicine applies only to rural areas.

Table 2: Perception of students regarding Community Medicine as a subject

Perceptions regarding CM as a subject	Agree n (%)	Disagree n (%)
1. Have you understood the main concept of community medicine	598 (85.4%)	102 (14.6%)
2. Have you realized the relevance of community medicine to the real health issue	675 (96.4%)	25 (3.6%)
3. Do you feel that your skill have improved in solving problems in community medicine	612 (87.4%)	88 (12.6%)
4. Do you feel that the knowledge and experience that you gained will be useful for your career as a doctor	687 (98.1%)	13 (1.9%)
5. Were the community medicine lectures interesting/stimulating	616 (88%)	84 (12%)
6. Were you encouraged to participate in the classroom	662 (94.6%)	38 (5.4%)
7. Do you feel preventive medicine is more relevant than curative medicine.	483 (69%)	217 (31%)
8. Learning about epidemiology helped me in my problem-solving skill	276 (39.4%)	424 (60.6%)
9. Knowledge of Govt. health schemes is necessary for every doctor	654 (93.4%)	46 (6.6%)
10. It helped me to understand preventive measures against diseases & knowledge about management of epidemics	675 (96.4%)	25 (3.6%)
11. Do you feel field visits need to be increased to make the subject more interesting to learn	684 (97.7%)	16 (2.3%)
12. Do you feel learning the history of medicine will make me a better doctor	572 (81.7%)	128 (18.3%)
13. Do you feel biostatistics is relevant in medical education.	546 (78%)	154 (22%)
14. Do you feel environmental sanitation, family and social medicine is an important topic in community medicine	642 (91.7%)	58 (8.3%)
15. CM is useful in personal life modification	576 (82.3%)	124 (17.7%)
16. Knowledge of CM is essential for successful clinical practice	472 (67.4%)	228 (32.6%)
17. Curriculum of CM is relevant to current time	549 (78.4%)	51 (21.6%)
18. More theoretical than practical	647 (92.4%)	53 (7.6%)
19. Applies only to rural area	438 (62.6%)	262 (37.4%)
20. Preventive medicine is only about vaccines and nutrition	508 (72.6%)	192 (27.4%)
21. CM gives an overall view of a community's medical need	572 (81.7%)	128 (18.3%)
22. Time allotted to CM is too much	603 (86.1%)	97 (13.9%)

Perception of students towards Community Medicine as a Career option

Table 3, displays the perception of students towards community medicine as a career option. about 128 (18.3%) students consider community medicine as a career option, majority of them feel that community

medicine will not provide adequate salary compared to other specialities. Among them, 121 (17.3%) reported that enough information regarding CM as a future prospect is not available and only few were impressed with community medicine

Table 3: Perception of students towards Community Medicine as a Career option

Perception of Students towards Community Medicine as a Career option	Agree n (%)	Neutral n (%)	Disagree n (%)
1. Would you consider community medicine as a career option	128 (18.3%)	162 (23.1%)	410 (58.6%)
2. Do you feel that community medicine will provide a salary which is comparable to other professions	225 (32.1%)	103 (14.7%)	372 (53.2%)
3. Do you feel that community medicine has a high level of scientific prestige equivalent to other specialties	147 (21%)	257 (36.7%)	296 (42.3%)
4. Do you feel that you can achieve fame in CM as compared to other disciplines	243 (34.7%)	163 (23.3%)	294 (42%)
5. Do you feel you will be satisfied with a career in CM	167 (24%)	125 (17.8%)	408 (58.2%)
6. Do you think a career in CM will bring you recognition in society	191 (27.3%)	128 (18.3%)	381 (54.4%)
7. Is there enough information regarding CM as a future prospect	121 (17.3%)	67 (9.6%)	512 (73.1%)
8. Are you impressed with anyone in the field of CM	173 (24.7%)	0 (0%)	527 (75.3%)
9. Have you seen anyone doing well in the field of CM	275 (39.3%)	0 (0%)	425 (60.7%)
10. Was the subject projected well by faculty and postgraduate students	510 (72.9%)	121 (17.3%)	69 (9.8%)
11. Do you think Faculty and Postgraduates are satisfied after choosing CM	445 (63.6%)	85 (12.1%)	170 (24.3%)

Reasons for not opting Community Medicine as a career preference

About 410 students (58.6%) are not willing to choose community medicine as a career option. Among these, 406 students (58%) cited low income and limited opportunities as key reasons, while 224 students (32%) felt that the field does not offer enough opportunities for direct patient treatment and 25 (6%) expressed that there is lack of information regarding future career prospect.

Discussion:

The present study was done to assess the perception of undergraduates regarding CM as a subject and as a career option. In this study, 357 (51%) participants were females and 343 (49%) were males. Most of them were resident of urban area, 487 (69.6%). These socio-demographic characteristics provide valuable context and may influence students' perceptions and career choices in community medicine. In current study, majority of the students, 598 (85.4%) understood the concept of community medicine, a similar finding was observed in the study done by Thakur AB et al. 81.19% students understood the concept of Community Medicine ⁽⁷⁾. About 675 (96.4%) students recognized the relevance of community medicine to the real health issues. This finding is similar to study done by Onwasigwe et al which also showed that 97.8% students felt that Community Medicine is important in the health sector ⁽⁸⁾. Almost 612 (87.4%) students feel that community medicine has improved their problem-solving skill. 687 (98.1%) students feel that the knowledge and experiences will be useful for their career as a doctor and 483 (69%) feel that preventive medicine is better than curative medicine. Muthamilan OL et al also reported similar finding in their study ⁽⁹⁾. More than half of the students reported that community medicine applies only to rural areas and 603 (86.1%) feel that time allotted to community medicine is more. However, Padhiyar PR, and Jasani PK in their study revealed that nearly half of the students disagreed that it applies only to rural area and 35.9% agree that time allotted to community medicine is more ⁽²⁾. In our study only 128 (18.3%) students reported that they will consider community medicine as a career

option. They feel that salary or income is not

adequate in Community medicine compared to other specializations. In our study, only 121 students (17.3%) indicated that they felt sufficient information on community medicine as a future career prospect was not available. In contrast, a study by Thakur AB et al. found that 26.8% of students actually opted for community medicine as a career, while a notably higher proportion—75.25%—felt that there was a lack of adequate information regarding its career prospects. These differing figures suggest that students' perceptions of career information can vary considerably by context. The higher percentage in Thakur AB et al.'s study may indicate that, in their setting, inadequate career guidance is a more prominent barrier to choosing community medicine ⁽⁷⁾. When reasons for not opting community medicine as career was asked, 406 (58%) said low income and less opportunities, and many students feel that they cannot treat patients, 224 (32%). According to Singh MK et al., one of the key reasons why many students are hesitant to choose community medicine as a career is due to a lack of clear future career prospects. Their study also highlighted that the absence of role models in community medicine and concerns regarding the specialty's prestige among peers and in society further discourage students from opting for this field. These findings suggest that, beyond financial and clinical considerations, the perceived social standing and guidance available in the discipline play a critical role in shaping career decisions. ⁽¹⁰⁾.

Conclusion

Despite recognizing the value of community medicine in providing a comprehensive understanding of healthcare, many students remain reluctant to pursue it as a career. The predominant reasons cited include concerns over lower income potential, the perception that community medicine offers limited direct patient care ("cannot treat patients"), and a lack of clear information regarding future career prospects in the field.

Recommendations:



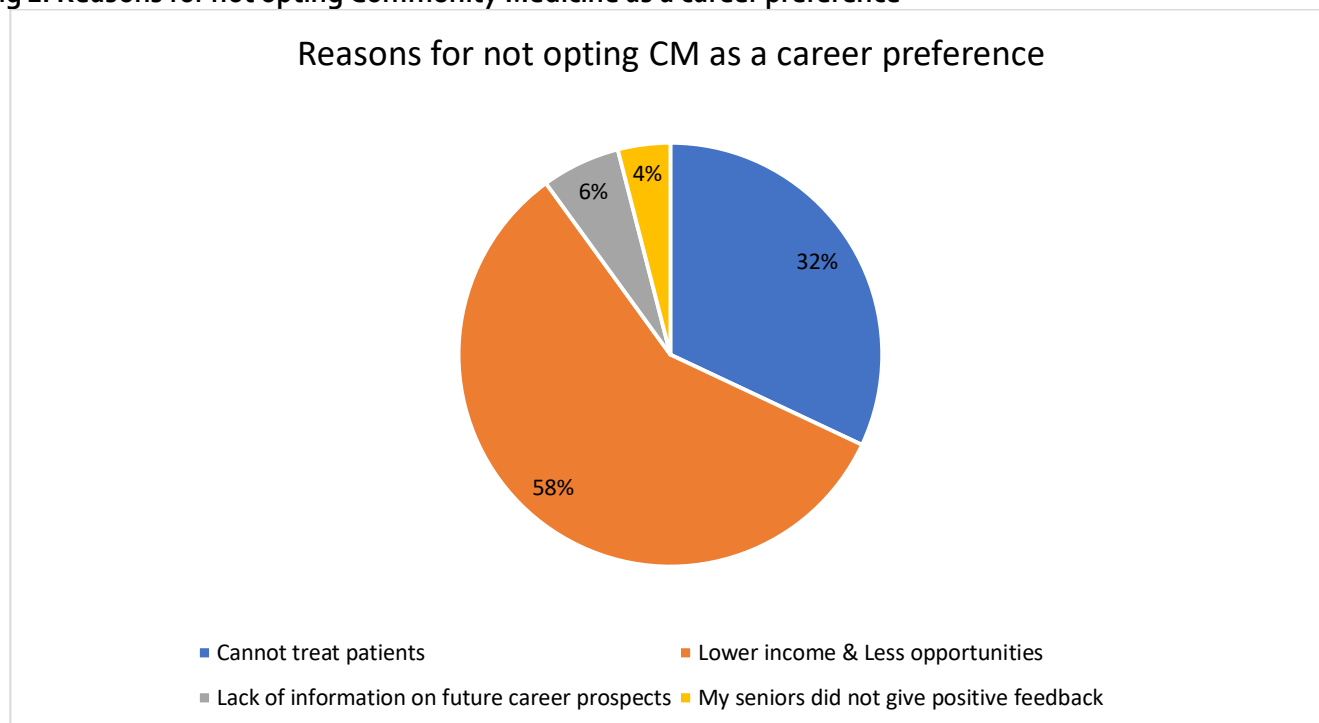
P.Sasikala et al.

- Community medicine occupies a significant portion of the curriculum, it's essential that students are not only exposed to the subject but also actively guided, oriented, and motivated to consider it as a viable career option in the future.
- Tailored career counselling, mentorship programs, and enhanced field-based learning experiences can help illustrate the real-world impact of community medicine,

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- ultimately shifting perceptions and increasing its appeal among medical graduates.
- By emphasizing practical relevance, career opportunities, and the critical role of preventive and community health approaches, educators can foster a more positive outlook and encourage more students to pursue community medicine as a career option.

Fig 1: Reasons for not opting Community Medicine as a career preference





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