



Original Research Article

Factors influencing career choice among optometry students: A questionnaire-based study

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ABSTRACT

An optometrist plays a central role in the busy, routine practice of an ophthalmologist, often the point of first contact. More and more higher educational institutions are offering a plethora of technology-based paramedical training courses. Optometry is one such field that has, in parallel, benefitted by the growth of technology. Despite so many other options being available, optometry continues to enjoy popularity. We undertook this study to assess what ticks inside the minds of young adolescents, and makes them choose optometry, to define their career track. Using Google forms and census sampling, we were able to get responses from 40 BSc Optometry students, across all years of the course. We found females outnumber males, hugely. Among the several factors that influence the decision-making in favor of optometry, the top ones included positive course credentials, huge market opportunities, altruism, pleasant work-life balance, and being perceived as a doctor.

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1. Introduction

Career choice is crucial in shaping one's life. It not only determines success and prosperity, but also impacts individual satisfaction. Paramedical courses are gaining popularity alongside mainstream medical branches among aspiring students. Paramedical fields are diverse and include technologies in medical laboratory, dialysis, radiology, operation theatre, optometry, audiometry among many others. The qualified individuals perform their duties under the supervision of the medical specialist and are in great demand in the healthcare set up.

Training in the field of optometry has received a boost after the formation of the Indian Optometry Force, the adoption of measures to oversee education and educational institutions and to register optometrists.¹ In the routine practice of ophthalmology, an optometrist is often the first contact for the patient. The optometrist is trained to handle ophthalmological equipment from simple vision drums to the more sophisticated ocular scans, conduct

ocular tests, dispense optical corrections like spectacles or contact lenses, assist the ophthalmologist in the operation theatre and carry out community-based eye check-up camps for visual rehabilitation. These responsibilities of the optometrist are often defined by the training undertaken: 2 years diploma or 4 years primary degree in optometry.¹

With an increase in awareness about early correction of refractive error, choosing fashionable corrective options and the blooming of optical shops, eye hospitals and optometry schools, an increasing number of students are taking up optometry as their career. The authors conducted this study to explore the factors that influenced the choice of optometry as a career among optometry students in a tertiary care hospital in South India.

2. Material and Methods

The questionnaire-based, cross-sectional study was conducted among the optometry students of a medical college after obtaining approval from the institutional ethics committee. The study followed the ICMR's National Ethical Guidelines for Biomedical and Health Research Involving

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Human Participants (2017) and the participants were enrolled after taking informed consent. The questionnaire consisted of likely reasons for choosing the optometry course and the responses were marked using Likert scale with a few open-ended questions. The questionnaire was validated by five experts and was distributed to the 42 BSc optometry students using Google forms and the census method of sampling.

3. Results

3.1. Demographic distribution

The questionnaire was sent to 42 students of optometry comprising 36 females (85.71%) and 6 males (14.28%) with a ratio of 6:1. The year-wise distribution was as follows: first year (20), second year (12) and third year (10). 40 (95.23%) responded to the questionnaire. All students came from the same or neighboring districts of Karnataka and Kerala. All belonged to the middle or lower socio-economic strata.

3.2. Factors influencing the choice of optometry

The reasons reported by the 40 students for choosing the optometry course are depicted in the graph below (Figure 1). The factors are summarized under the following headings:

3.2.1. Impression about the course

The most common reason agreed upon by the students for choosing the optometry course was an overall good impression or opinion about the course (90%), although only 12.5% felt it was an easy course to take up and only 5% were influenced by the popularity of the course in their institution. However, 7.5% thought they had no other career option to choose from and hence chose optometry.

3.2.2. Job opportunities after graduating

The second-most rated factor for choosing optometry as a career was the perception of availability of good job opportunities abroad (85%) and in India (37.5%), whereas 72.5% felt that they could set up their own business. More than one-third (40%) perceived that a degree in optometry had a potential for a satisfactory salary or income. Only 5% joined because they had to be part of the family business of optometry.

3.2.3. Optometry for a social cause

70% of the students agreed that by choosing optometry as a career, they could provide service to patients with eye problems. Whereas 37.5% believed they could work like a doctor and serve the community, 12.5% had aspired to become eye surgeons, but couldn't.

3.2.4. Personal gratification from choosing this career

A majority believed that a career in optometry would help balance work and family life (62.5%) and many felt that the workload would not be strenuous (37.5%). More than one-thirds considered (37.5%) optometry as a respectable profession.

3.2.5. Other influences

32.5% of the students were guided by the elders to join the course and 25% had a role model who was an optometrist. Few were influenced by an ophthalmologist member of the family and by friends (2.5% each).

3.3. Satisfaction with the choice of optometry course

In response to the open-ended question, 95% responded that they were happy and the reasons narrated for being happy with their career choice were being able to serve people, see a smile on the face of the patients, maintain family responsibilities, increase awareness of phone-related eye disorders, avail job opportunities, set up an optical shop, and satisfy parent's dreams, among others. The reasons quoted in the open-ended question were in alignment with the closed-ended questions. Only 2 were unhappy about joining the course but the reasons remained undisclosed.

4. Discussion

The percentage of girls among the optometry students was as high as 85.71% in this institution and is very likely to be influenced by gender in the local social structure. A study of young children on career aspirations showed that paramedical courses featured among the top 20 occupations and middle class girls were more likely to choose paramedical courses when compared to boys.² There are no studies on the specific choice of optometry based on gender. In a study in ethnic minorities, it was observed that the awareness among girls about paramedical courses - other than pharmacy - was very low.³ However, in this part of the world, higher literacy rates and increased proportion of women taking up jobs may be responsible for greater number of women in optometry despite the course being embedded in specialization in medical technology. A study in the Netherlands has described that the number of girl students taking up courses in technology is as low as 17% since technology seems to be a more male-dominated career.⁴ However, in our study, girls dominated and this may be reflective of the gender role in our society, driving women to pursue higher education. Also, as per the American optometry, the number of women optometrists is likely to increase steadily.⁵

Career choice is not based on one, but multiple factors. Our study showed that students are influenced by several factors like the course itself, the job opportunities, the social cause, personal aspirations and also influence by others.

The majority (90%) of students chose their career keeping in mind the overall opinion about the course determined by several features. This was despite the fact that only a few considered it as an easy subject, and a very few were influenced by the institution which runs the course. However, in another study at Pune, the career choice was influenced by the hospital infrastructure and working environment among nearly 90% of the students and alumni of medical technology courses.⁶ It is possible that demographic and social diversity may be the reason for this discrepancy.

In our study, it was seen that 7.5% chose optometry since they had no other career option to choose from. This proportion was much lower compared to the study from South Africa (2011) where 29.5% chose optometry for a similar reason.⁷ It is therefore important for institutions and the teachers to design and transact the curriculum in ways such that even those students who join the course, not by their own choice, will pursue and complete the course with interest and inclination. This may reduce drop-outs from the course and frustration among students.

Our study revealed that job opportunities outside India (85%) are important influencing factors among students choosing optometry. This was similar to a study conducted in Ghana where 90% of optometry students chose this course because of job availability.⁸

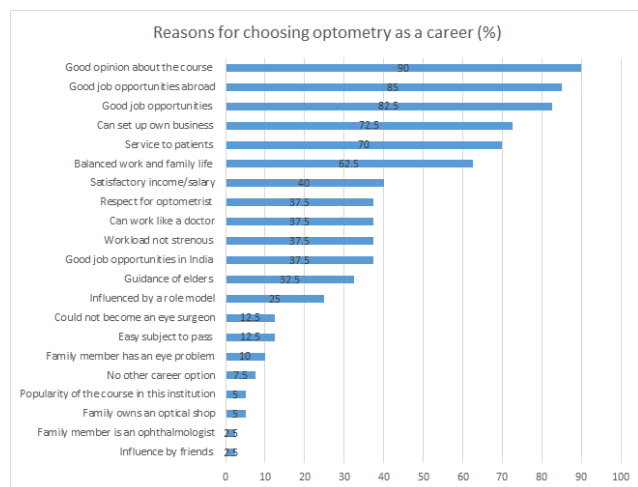


Fig. 1: Reasons for choosing optometry as a career (%)

More students are attracted to job opportunities outside India (85%) than within India (37.5%) paralleling the trend of migration among nurses and other skilled persons - especially from the female gender - to the Middle East countries for jobs, thereby contributing to the Kerala model of economy. A similar trend has trickled into Karnataka.⁹ Since most of our students hail from the districts of South Karnataka and adjoining Kerala, the same trend may be mirrored in the job aspirations of optometry students. More than one-third (40%) perceived that they

could get a satisfactory salary/ income.

In our study, 72.5% agreed that they could set up their own business and 5% because they had a family business of opticals. In a study from India, it was found that one third of the optometrists were engaged in optical shops although many had multiple job engagements.¹⁰ Optical shops are flourishing in every part of India.

70% of the students agreed that by choosing optometry as a career, they would get an opportunity to provide service to patients with eye problems. The desire to help other people (89.2%) as a factor to choose optometry for a career has also been reported from other studies in Ghana and South Africa (92.5%).^{7,8} Vision is a very cherished “special sense” and therefore serving a person affected with visual problems is considered a noble, altruistic task. In our study, 37.5% believed they could serve like a doctor and 12.5% had an unfulfilled aspiration to become eye surgeons, themselves. This indicates their desire to be of social value to society. Not only is this the aspiration of many optometrists, the Indian eye health industry also in need of the optometry workforce. There is a move to grant an independent healthcare professional status to optometrists which is likely to benefit people across the geographic and socio-economic strata of India.¹ In our study, more than one-third also considered optometry as a respectable profession and the basis for this respect would be linked to the service provided to patients and the close association of the optometrists with the ophthalmologists.

A sizeable majority believed that a career in optometry would help balance work and family life (62.5%) and many opined the workload would not be strenuous (37.5%). Optometry is considered to provide a good work-life balance and is suitable for women as they often want to have a career and continue to play a central role in the families.⁵

Other factors that influenced the option of joining optometry, include suggestions by elders, role models and ophthalmologists in the family and among friends. Studies indicate that family has a big influence on the career choices of students.¹¹ Role models have a positive influence on career development, as they tend to enhance goal and work engagement effectively.¹²

According to our findings, the choice of optometry course is multifactorial and includes, personal aspirations, the nature of the course, the job opportunities and salary and individual influences as evidenced in other studies.^{11,13}

5. Conclusion

Optometry, as a career option, seems to be preferred by females more than males. Factors influencing the choice of optometry as a career are varied and include personal aspirations, the nature of the course, the job opportunities and economic benefits, and individual influences. It is essential to design the curriculum in such a way that every student is motivated to learn the skills and perform such that

the field of optometry thrives.

6. Source of Funding

None.

7. Conflict of Interest

None.

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