

Imi Ho'ola Program: Producing Primary Care Physicians for Hawai'i and the Pacific

Chessa C. DeCambra MBA and Winona K. Lee MD

Abstract

Background: *The impact on health care delivery due to the impending shortage of primary care physicians is of national concern. To meet the growing health care needs of Hawai'i and the Pacific, the Imi Ho'ala Post-Baccalaureate Program (IHP) provides educational opportunities for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to pursue careers in medicine. Students selected to participate in the IHP have demonstrated a commitment to serve in areas of need of Hawai'i and the Pacific. IHP alumni enter the John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) as first year medical students. Following graduation, these students enter a variety of residency training programs.*

Purpose: *The purpose of this study was to determine whether IHP alumni who successfully graduate from JABSOM choose primary care as their specialty of choice.*

Methods: *A retrospective review of IHP alumni from 1973 – 2010 was conducted. All IHP alumni who graduated from JABSOM and are currently in practice were included in the study.*

Results: *Of the 213 IHP graduates, 71.6% (n=152) are primary care physicians currently in practice.*

Conclusions: *The majority of IHP alumni are currently serving as primary care physicians. Selection criteria, educational curriculum, and experiential nature of the program may contribute to Imi Ho'ala's success in producing primary care physicians.*

Introduction

By 2025, The United States is projected to face a shortage of 65,800 primary care physicians.¹ Under the new Affordable Care Act, increased demand for the newly insured will create additional tension on an already stressed health care system. Increased demand for primary care services due to aging baby boomers and rising prevalence of chronic diseases coupled with decreased supply due to physician retirement and fewer graduates entering primary care residencies contribute to this impending crisis.² Despite the need for more primary care physicians in the health care workforce, the number of medical students choosing this specialty nationwide is on the decline. Recent surveys show that only 16-18% of medical students are planning to go into primary care.³

In an effort to meet the healthcare needs of Hawai'i and the Pacific, the Imi Ho'ola (Those Who Seek to Heal) Post-Baccalaureate Program at the John A. Burns School of Medicine (JABSOM) was established more than 30 years ago. The Imi Ho'ola Program's (IHP) goal is to contribute to diversity of the health care workforce and produce physicians committed to practice in under-served communities in Hawai'i and the Pacific. Up to 12 students from economic, social, and/or educationally disadvantaged backgrounds are selected for the program each year. The curriculum emphasizes the integration of concepts in the sciences and humanities and further develops students' communication, critical thinking, and learning skills. Upon successful completion of the program, students enter JABSOM as first-year medical students.

Few studies have shown whether post-baccalaureate programs positively contribute to the number of medical school graduates who eventually become primary care physicians. The purpose of

this study is to determine whether IHP alumni who successfully graduate from JABSOM choose primary care as their specialty of choice.

Methods

This study is a retrospective review of IHP alumni from 1973 - 2010, who have graduated from JABSOM and are currently in practice. All physicians, except for those listed as residents, fellows, or no longer in practice, were included in the study. Gender, ethnicity, and medical specialty data was provided to IHP by program participants either during the IHP admissions process or at the time of JABSOM graduation and stored in the IHP database. Primary care specialty included family medicine, family practice, internal medicine, internal medicine/pediatrics, internal medicine/flexible residency, obstetrics/gynecology, pediatrics, primary care, and primary care/internal medicine. This study is a report on educational developments, not on human subjects research.

Results

Of the 213 IHP graduates, 71.6% (n = 152) practice primary care. Of the 152, there were a total of 79 females (52%) and 73 males (48%). Ethnicity categories did not indicate a clear majority and included 53 Hawaiians, 46 Filipinos, 27 Pacific Islanders (Chamorro, Kosraen, Marshallese, Palauan (Belauan), Pohnpeian, Yapese, Samoan), 14 Asians (Chinese, Japanese, Korean), 8 East Asians (Cambodian, Taiwanese, Vietnamese), 3 American Indians, and 1 Caucasian.

Discussion

The study's findings indicate that the majority of IHP alumni not only choose primary care, but are also currently in practice. These findings are most likely related to (1) selection criteria for admission, (2) program curriculum, and (3) experiential learning opportunities. The IHP is an institutionalized approach to increase the enrollment of disadvantaged students at JABSOM. Students must meet the required selection criteria of disadvantaged status in order to qualify for the Program and demonstrate a strong commitment to serve in areas of need in the State of Hawai'i and the U.S.-Affiliated Pacific Islands. Many of the students who participate in the IHP originate from rural areas and express an early interest in returning to their home community to practice rural medicine. The study's findings suggest that the IHP may self-select students who would naturally gravitate to the generalist/primary care specialties.

Once enrolled in IHP, it is the program's belief that the curriculum, specifically the Scientific Basis of Medicine (SBOM) course, encourages students' initial inclination towards general/primary care specialties. As one of the core courses in the IHP curriculum, SBOM introduces students to the global view of health and disease, explores the roles of health professionals working in various health-care settings, and provides awareness of health-care delivery resources in Hawai'i. Using a combination of group discussions, visual media, and guest speakers, SBOM aims to improve personal

and professional student growth. Guest speakers include physician role-models who exemplify professional traits and practice in rural communities, who offer real-world perspectives on health, culture, and health disparities that may have been directly observed by the students in their home communities. For many students, this legitimizes their personal experiences with health care in Hawai'i and the Pacific and builds upon their interest and motivation to practice rural medicine in these areas.

In hopes of further reinforcing and sustaining student interest in practicing medicine in rural communities, IHP provides students with two distinct experiential learning opportunities on the neighbor islands. During the academic school year, students participate in a service learning project in the Kalaupapa settlement on the island of Moloka'i and a week-long rural community medicine shadowing experience on one of the main Hawaiian islands. As part of the SBOM curriculum on leprosy, the Kalaupapa Service Learning Project provides students with the opportunity to interact with remaining patients in the settlement and receive exposure to practicing primary care in a rural setting. During the rural community medicine shadowing experience, primary care physicians (many of whom are also IHP alumni) provide shadowing opportunities in community clinics or private practice and share with IHP students their outlook on primary care and possible career trajectories. These experiences foster greater understanding of what practicing primary care in a rural setting is like from a provider's point of view and assists students in reflecting on their own abilities and desires to return

to their home communities. Having these primary care physicians serve as positive role models and as future mentors are a vital part of the IHP students' learning experiences.

In conclusion, the study found that the majority of IHP alumni chose primary care medical specialties and IHP does contribute to the number of JABSOM graduates who eventually become primary care physicians. Future studies are planned to examine if student-specific factors, such as socio-economic background and rural community of origin are predictive of a student's eventual practice specialty choice. Program specific elements of the IHP curriculum could also be examined to further explain how the IHP positively impacts students' perceptions on primary care and rural medicine.

The authors report no conflict of interest, but wish to acknowledge support for the Imi Ho'ola Program from Queen's Health Systems.

Authors' Affiliation:
- University of Hawai'i John A. Burns School of Medicine, Honolulu, HI

Correspondence to:
Winona K. Lee MD; 651 Ilalo Street, MEB 306H, Honolulu, HI, 96813; Ph: (808) 692-1035;
Email: winonal@hawaii.edu

References

1. Physician Shortages to Worsen Without Training. AAMC Website. 2010. https://www.aamc.org/download/150584/data/physician_shortages_factsheet.pdf. Accessed 5/17/11.
2. Staiger, D. Comparison of physician workforce estimates and supply projections. *JAMA*. 2009, 302(15):1674-1680.
3. Schwartz, M. Changes in Medical Students' Views of Internal Medicine Careers from 1990-2007. *Arch Intern Med*. 2011, 171(8):744-748.