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Medical Students' Attitudes toward Military Medicine

As we observed in a previous publication,¹ despite their considerable level of indebtedness, a surprisingly large percentage of students graduating from our institution were unaware of military medical education programs that would cover the costs of their professional training. This led us to conduct a more extensive review of all four classes at UMDNJ-New Jersey Medical School to determine whether this was a class- and time-specific phenomenon or whether it prevailed throughout the institution. We developed a questionnaire to address the medical students' awareness of financial assistance programs sponsored by the military that would pay for their medical education in return for military service as a physician. We administered this instrument to members of the classes of 1997 through 2000 during their orientations at the beginning of the 1996-97 academic year. When asked whether they were aware of any program that would pay for their medical education in exchange for military service, only a third to half responded in the affirmative; very few of them (4-7%) could name the program. Only 22-33% were aware of any program that would repay a portion of their education loans in exchange for military service, and 0-2% of them could name the program.²

When queried about the appeal of Department of Defense (DOD) loan-repayment programs, 30-44% of the four classes favored the one known as the Health Professionals Loan Repayment Program, which provides repayment for

physicians in the Reserves who are board eligible in a wartime-critical specialty. Smaller percentages favored the Specialized Training Assistance Program, which provides a monthly stipend during each year of residency training in specialties critical to wartime requirements. Relatively large percentages (24-36%) indicated that none of the DOD programs held any appeal for them. When questioned regarding their willingness to serve in the military under various conditions (e.g., in time of war, during peace-keeping operations, as a reservist), the most popular response was "would not consider serving in the military under any circumstances."²

Clearly the DOD needs to better publicize its financial assistance programs. In addition, it needs to enlighten medical students regarding the high caliber of residency training programs in the military so that they are considered viable choices for postgraduate medical education. Despite the increasing level of indebtedness faced by our students, most profess ignorance about military career opportunities offering financial assistance with tuition or loan repayment. What is even more striking is the disinterest they display when given information about such options.

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