What factors are related to medical students’ and doctors’ attitudes towards older patients?

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Background
Questionnaire studies have sought to identify the possible determinants of medical students’ and doctors’ attitudes towards older patients by examining relationships with a variety of factors, such as demographic; educational/training; exposure to older people; personality/cognitive; and job/career variables. This review collates and synthesises these findings.

Methods
Design: Systematic literature review
Review question: Which variables show a relationship with doctors’ and medical students’ self-reported attitudes towards older patients?
Search terms: Boolean search in title or abstract: [physicians, medical students + 26 synonyms] AND [older people +17 synonyms] AND [attitudes + 18 synonyms].
Search strategy: An electronic search of 10 databases was performed (ABI/Inform, ASSIA, British Nursing Index, CINAHL, Informa Health, Medline, PsycINFO, Science Direct, Scopus, and Web of Science) through to 7 February 2017.
Inclusion/exclusion criteria: Studies were included if they: quantitatively measured and reported attitudes toward older patients in medical doctors or medical students; conducted correlational analyses or difference testing of scores on measure of attitudes towards older patients with any other variable; and published in English in a peer-reviewed journal.
Quality assessment and extraction: Quality appraised using the STROBE checklist (von Elm et al., 2007).

Results: Characteristics of studies
Searches identified 2422 articles; 37 studies met the overall eligibility criteria set.
Quality: rated low quality (n=14); medium quality (n=18); high quality (n=5).
Study setting: USA (n=25); UK (n=3); Singapore (n=3); Australia (n=2); Other (n=4).

Results: Relationships identified
With 14 low quality studies removed from the analysis, the figure below shows a selection of variables investigated for their relationship with attitudes.

Conclusions
Across high and medium quality studies, positive attitudes towards older patients were related to:
• high quality personal relationships with older people,
• interest in pursuing geriatrics,
• intrinsic motivation to enter medicine (such as the desire to help others).
Negative attitudes towards older patients were related to:
• extrinsic motivation to enter medicine (such as financial rewards).

Avenues for future research
• Early identification of medical students who may be interested in working with older patients using questionnaire research;
• Explore intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for entering medicine as a factor for specialising in older patient-dominated areas of medicine;
• Explore the nature of the link between good quality personal relationships (as opposed to frequency of contact) with older people and attitudes;
• Consider geriatrics interventions which focus on personal relationships with healthy older people to improve attitudes.

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