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Choice of Speciality among Medical Students at the Faculty of Medical Sciences, St. Augustine, UWI, Trinidad and Tobago, West Indies

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INTRODUCTION

- The School of Medicine at the Faculty of Medical Sciences, University of the West Indies (FMS, UWI) graduates over 200 physicians yearly
- Shortage of specialists exists; attributed by some, to the lack of opportunities. Challenges faced regarding medical specialization in Trinidad and Tobago (TT) are difficulties meeting the requirements of the available specialty programmes, lack of residency post and training in certain fields (1).
- Medical school is an opportune time to select a field as experience as a student and progression through the various years of medical school can influence choice (2,3).

METHODOLOGY

- A cross-sectional study was conducted by convenience sampling on 1278 medical students at the FMS, UWI using an online questionnaire.
- The distribution of specialist practitioners was abstracted from the online register of The Medical Board of Trinidad and Tobago

OBJECTIVES

- To determine the choice of specialty among medical students.
- To determine the motivating factors for career choice among students.
- To determine the distribution of registered specialist physicians in TT
- To determine the proportion of students with migration intent for specialization and the common reasons.

RESULTS

A total of 273 out of 1278 medical students at the University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus responded (21.36% response rate), the majority of whom were females (73.6%) with mean age 22.5 (SD3.3) years.

Fig 1: Top 10 Specialty Choices among medical students

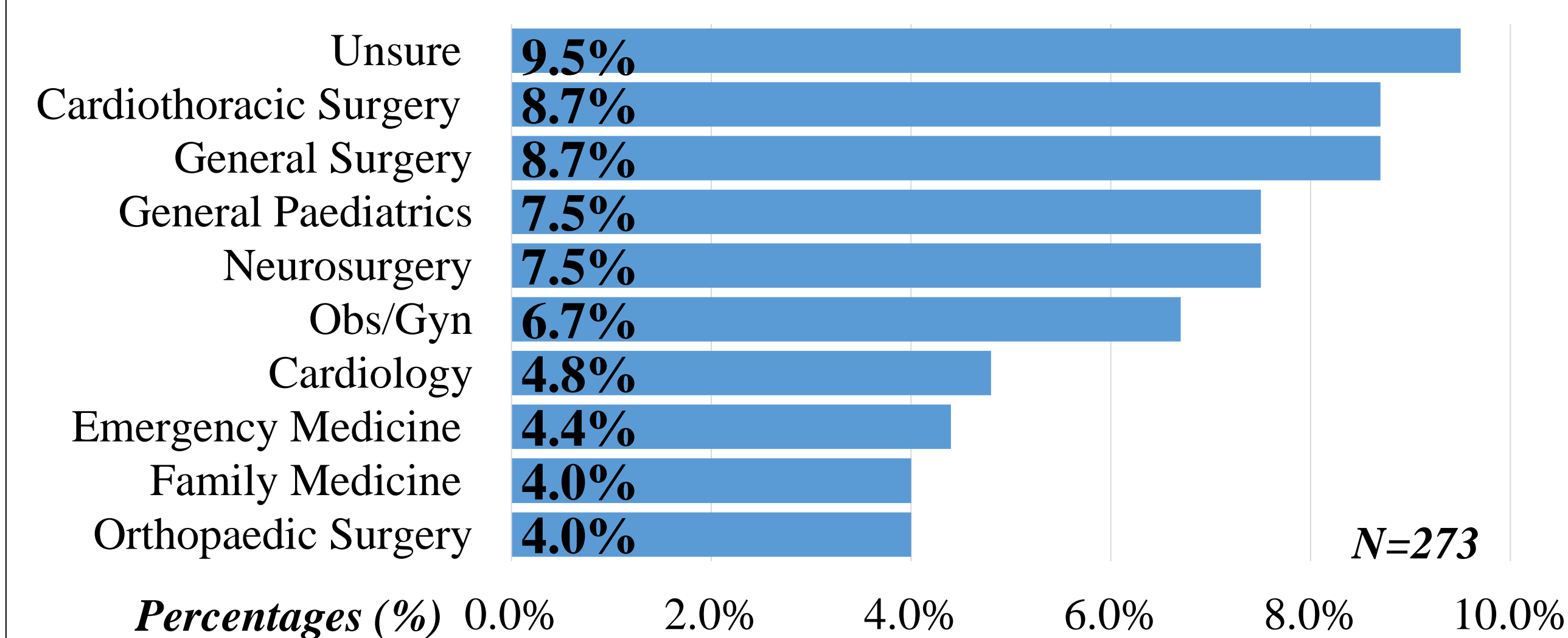


Figure 1 shows the 10 most popular 1st choice specialties (%) among students. Pathology (3.6%), psychiatry (3.6%), radiology (3.6%), anaesthesia (2.8%), dermatology (2.8%), pediatric surgery (2.8%), ophthalmology (1.6%), adult oncology (1.6%), neonatology (1.6%), internal Medicine (1.2%), neurology (1.2%) were the other choices. The top 5 factors ranked as being important in influencing choices were, general interest in the field (95.9%), job security (81.3%), job availability (70.3%), demand for specialists in the field (69.6%) and lifestyle (67%).

Fig 2: Top 10 specialties being practiced in T&T

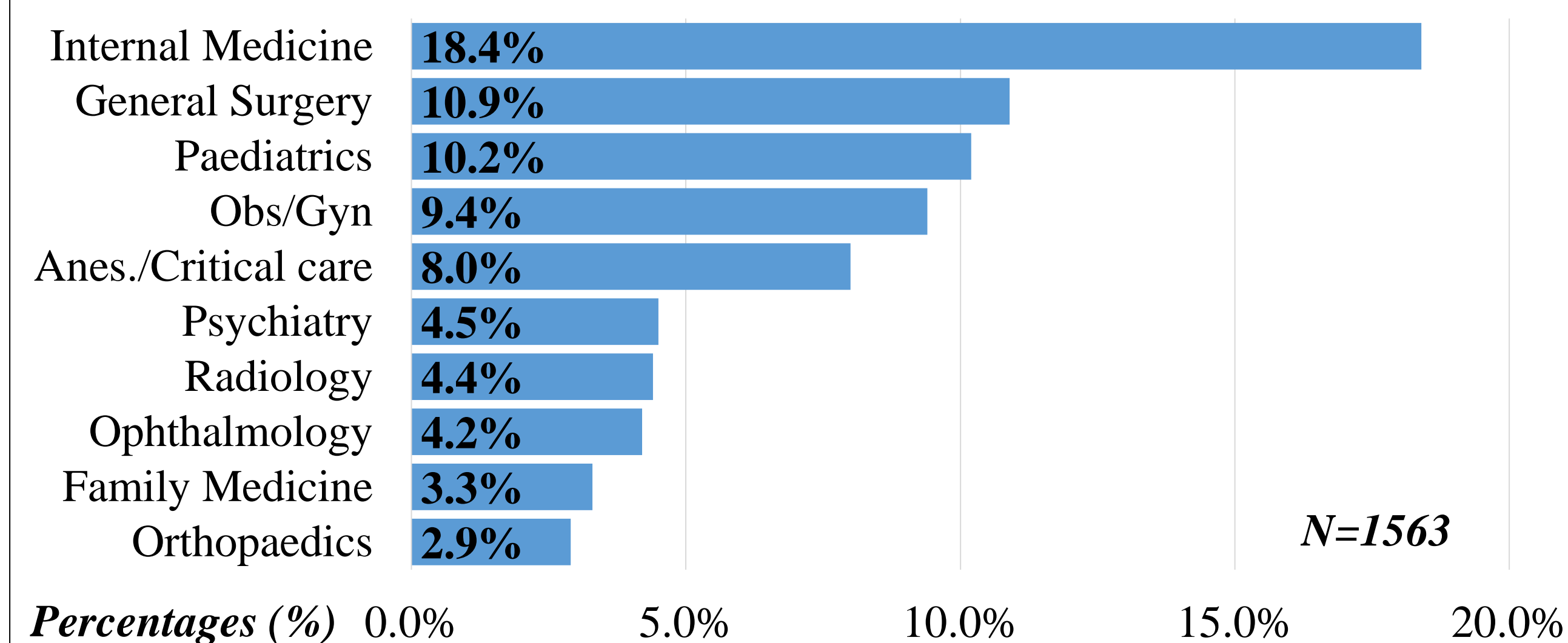


Figure 2 shows the distribution of the 1563 registered specialist physicians in TT. Emergency medicine (2.8%), public health (2.6%), pathology (2.1%), cardiology (1.7%), urology (1.5%), dermatology (1.3%), otorhinolaryngology (1.1%) were the next most popular (4).

Fig 3: Migration intent to specialize

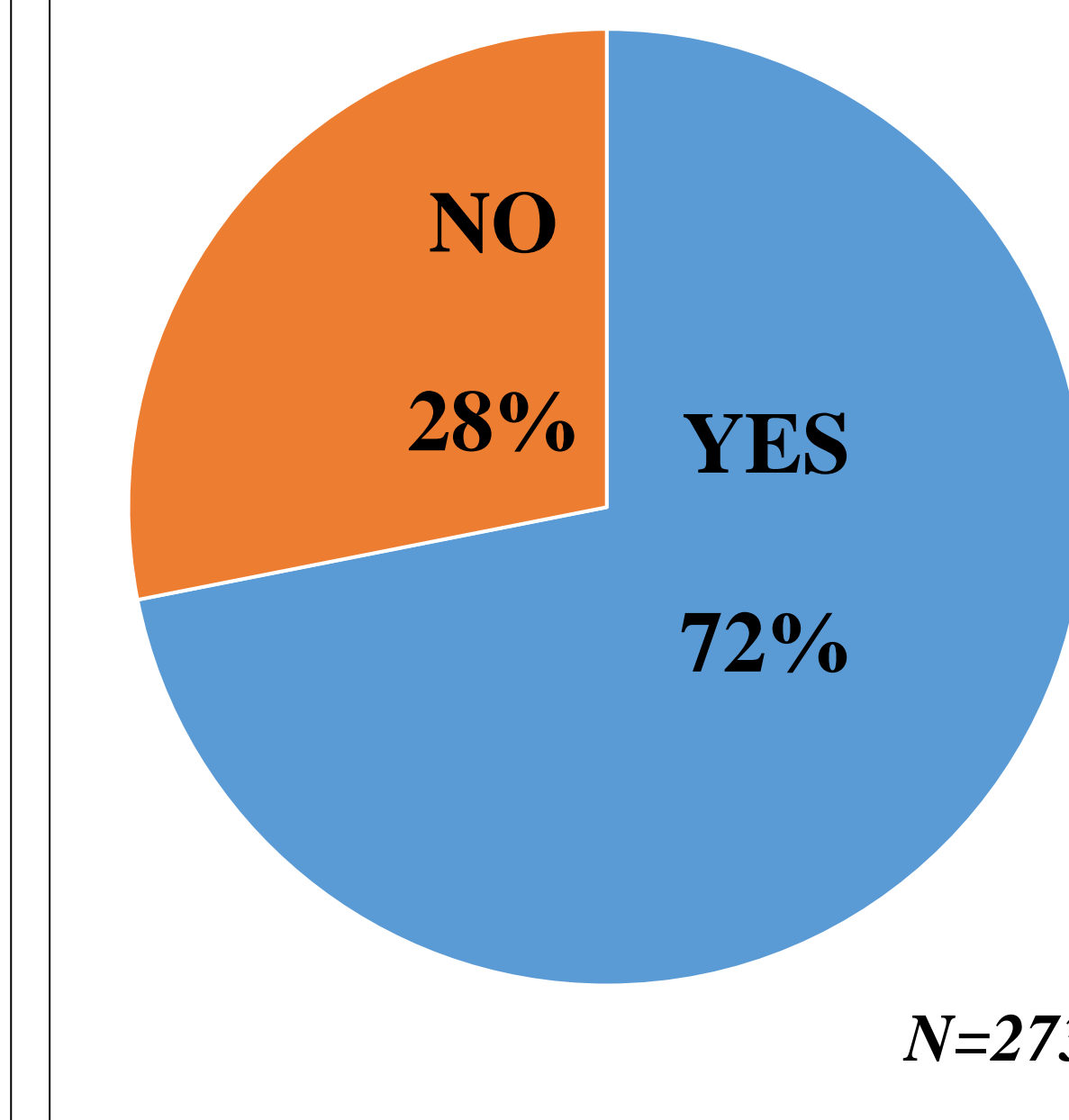
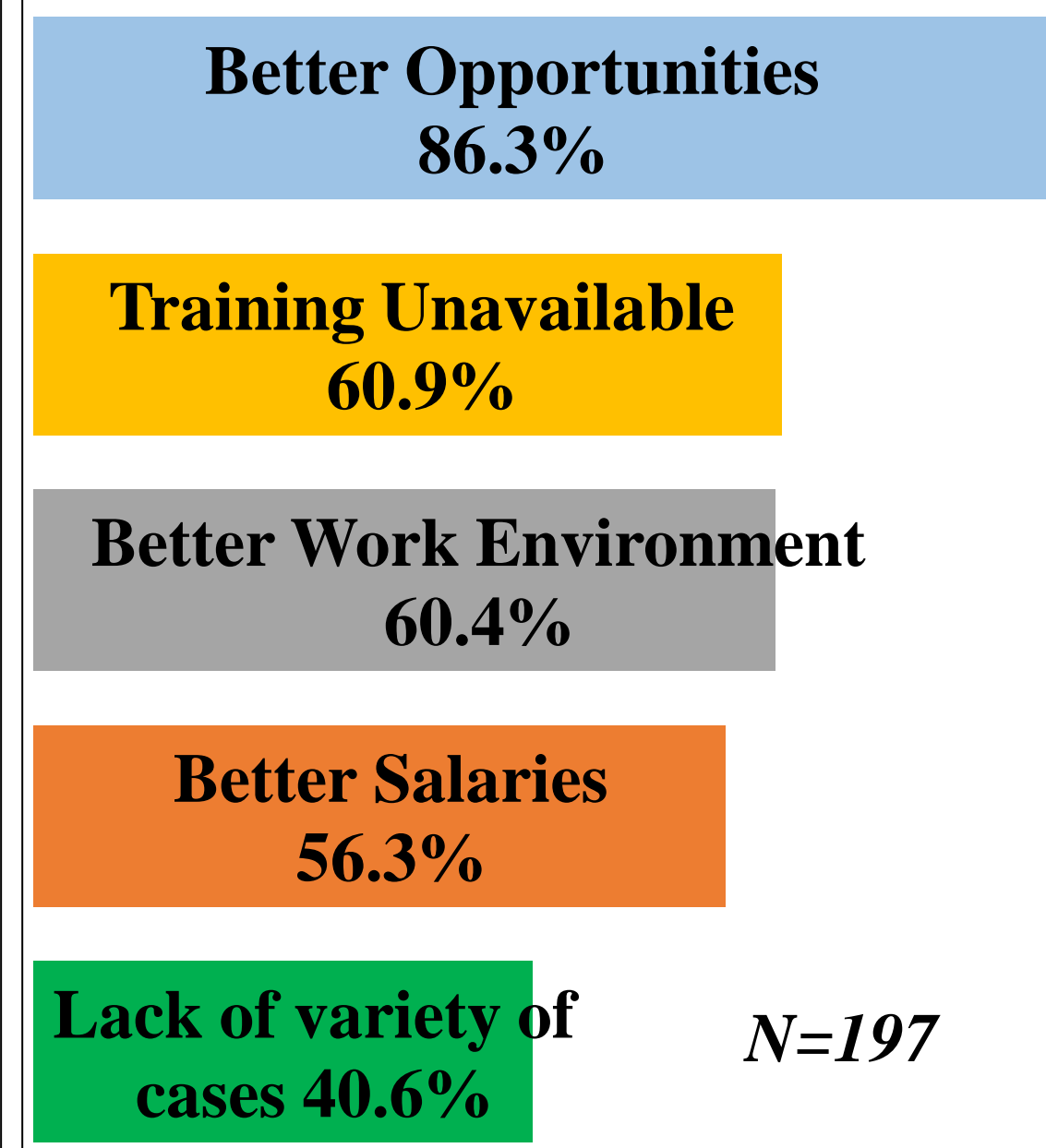


Fig 4: Top 5 reasons for migration



Figures 3 shows the proportion of students who intend to migrate to specialize. Figure 4 show the top 5 reason for migration.

NOTEWORTHY ASSOCIATIONS

- Gender was independent of specialty choice except for females choosing a pediatric field ($P=0.018$) and males choosing cardiothoracic surgery ($P=0.003$).
- Compared to specialist practitioners, significantly more students aspired to do cardiothoracic surgery, neurosurgery, pediatric surgery, and cardiology, while significantly less students chose internal medicine, anaesthesia and critical care and ophthalmology. ($P<0.05$ for all)
- Of the students who intended to migrate to specialize, 56% selected a field for which speciality training existed locally vs. 69% of those who did not plan to migrate ($P=0.08$)

DISCUSSION

- Top ranking specialties among medical students continue to dominate the specialties of surgery, paediatrics, OB/GYN and Emergency Medicine
- Students' choices were fairly consistent with current specialist practice in TT. The mismatch between some students' career choices and contemporaneous practice however, may suggest oversaturation, limited access to postgraduate training or misperceptions of those specialties.
- The independence of migration intent from availability of 1st choice postgraduate career locally suggests lack of opportunities for specialization in TT.
- Limitations**
 - Selection bias due to convenient sampling and lack of generalizability of findings to all FMS UWI medical students.
 - Comparisons with specialty practice may not have been complete as not all specialists are listed on the speciality register.

CONCLUSION

- While medical students' career aspirations mirrored existing practice for most specialties, mismatches exist for certain careers. Most students hope to migrate for postgraduate training which may result in 'medical brain drain' and future shortages in certain specialty areas in TT.
- Recommendations**
 - Formal manpower assessment and forecasting for medical specialists
 - Funding of residency posts, expansion of postgraduate training, mentoring and interventions during medical school geared towards career choice
 - Dedicated scholarships for postgraduate training abroad
 - Retention of locals who emigrate for training

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