

Knowledge of capacity assessment and its application among doctors in an Irish teaching hospital

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Background

- Capacity is the ability to understand relevant information and to appreciate the consequences of a decision.
- While capacity is a legal construct, its assessment is clinical.
- Capacity assessment may affect a patient's ability to exercise personal autonomy.
- Clinical assessment also aims to determine the extent, cause and reversibility of the patient's incapacity.^{1,2}
- Studies in UK and New Zealand have demonstrated limited knowledge of and confidence in assessing capacity among medical doctors of all specialities; a need for additional training for doctors was identified.^{3,4}
- Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) Act 2015:
 - Applies to those whose decision-making capacity is being called into question, or may shortly be called into question
 - Signed into law in 2015 but has not been commenced
 - Where an individual is unable to make decisions on their own, the Act provides for the appointment of decision-makers on a graduated scale

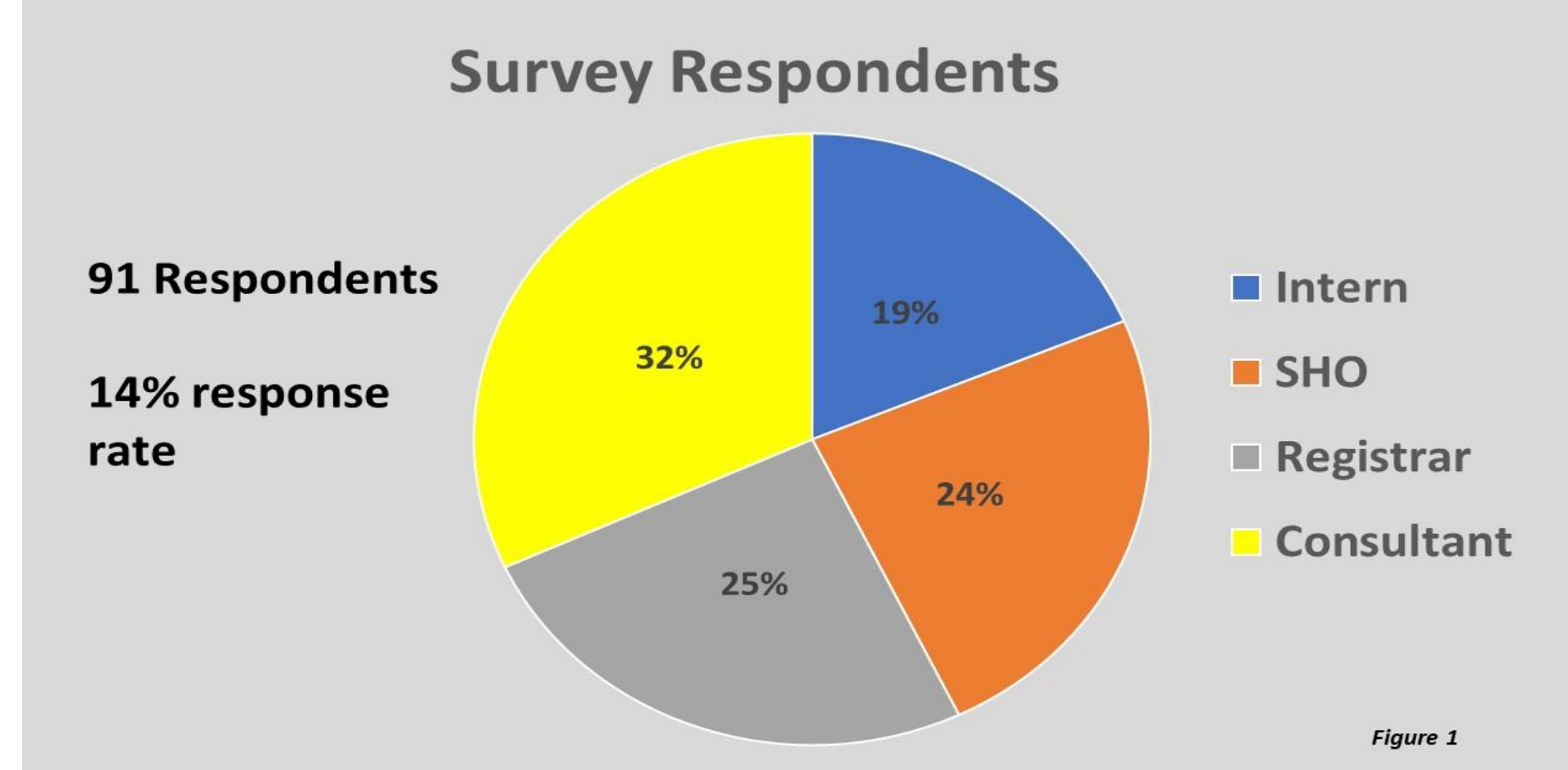
Aims

- Assess knowledge of and confidence in undertaking capacity assessments.
- Assess knowledge of the Assisted Decision Making (Capacity) Act 2015 among medical practitioners in an Irish hospital.
- Identify the training needs in the area of capacity assessment and future application of the Capacity Act.

Methods

- Doctors working in St. Vincent's University Hospital were invited to complete a 12-item questionnaire over a four-week period in March 2021.
- The survey was conducted using an online programme: "Sphinx". Doctors were sent an email invitation to partake in the survey. A reminder email was sent to potential participants after 3 weeks. Data was analysed using "Sphinx".
- Ethical approval was obtained from the audit committee in St. Vincent's University Hospital.

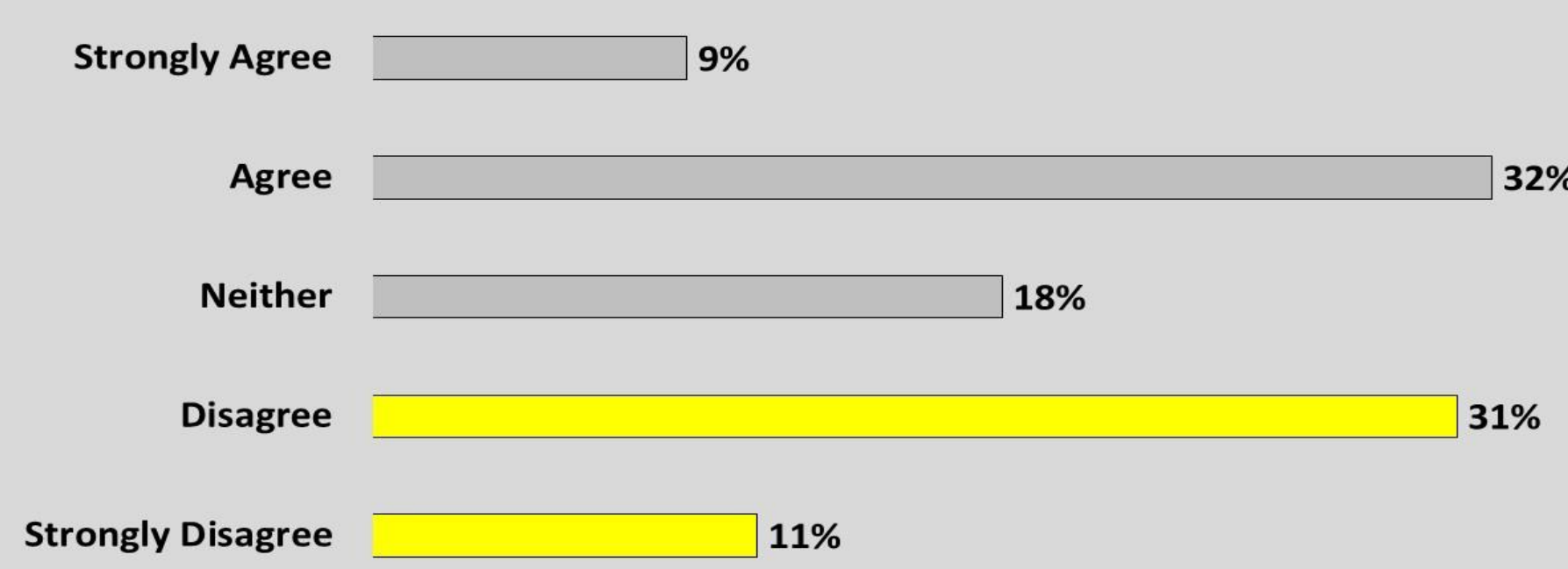
Results



Capacity Assessment Competency

- 28% of doctors were unaware or unsure of the circumstances in which a capacity assessment should be undertaken.
- 40% of doctors have never completed a capacity assessment. This was lowest among consultants at 35%, which is likely reflective of their role as senior clinical decision makers.

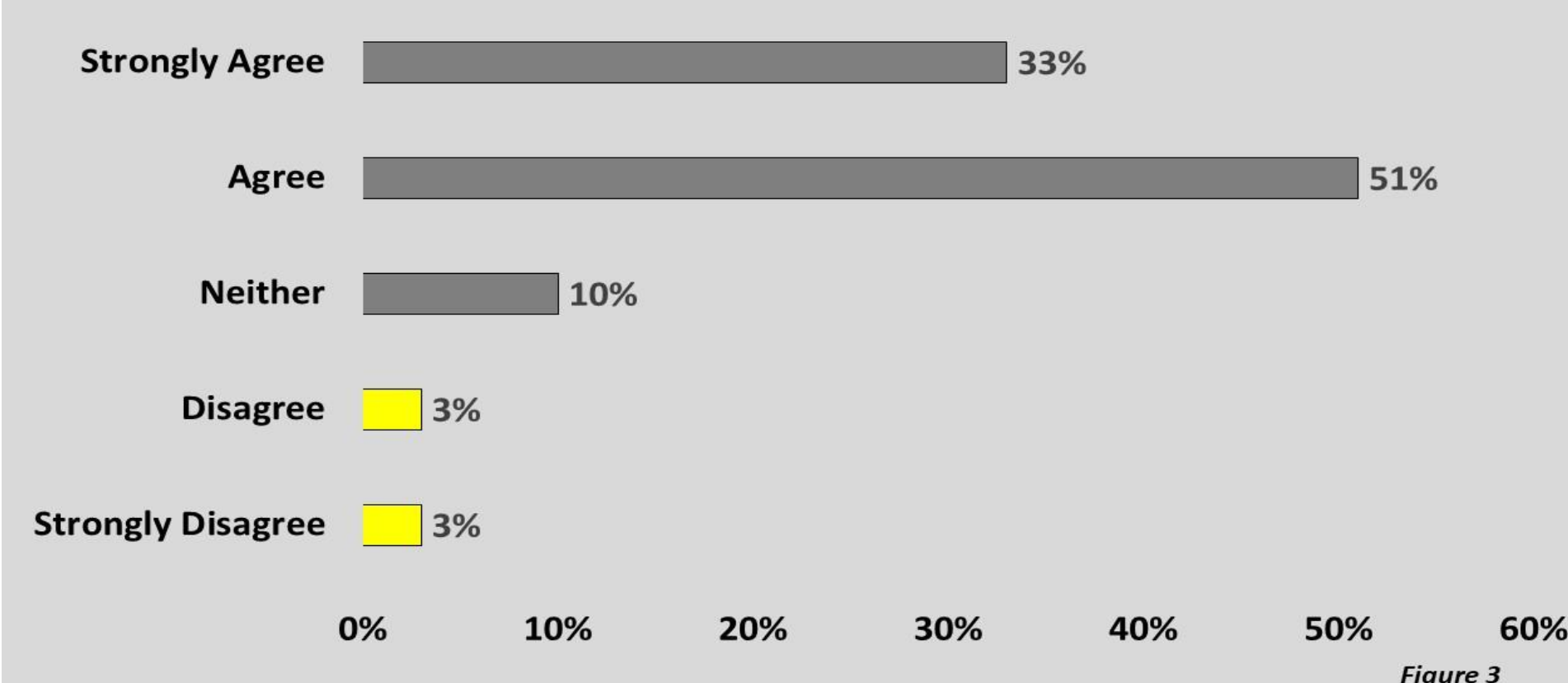
I am confident in my abilities to carry out a capacity assessment



Assisted Decision Making Act 2015

- 59% of respondents were aware of the Capacity Act, with just 6% believing that it was not relevant to their clinical practice.
- 74% said that education on their responsibilities under the Act had been inadequate.

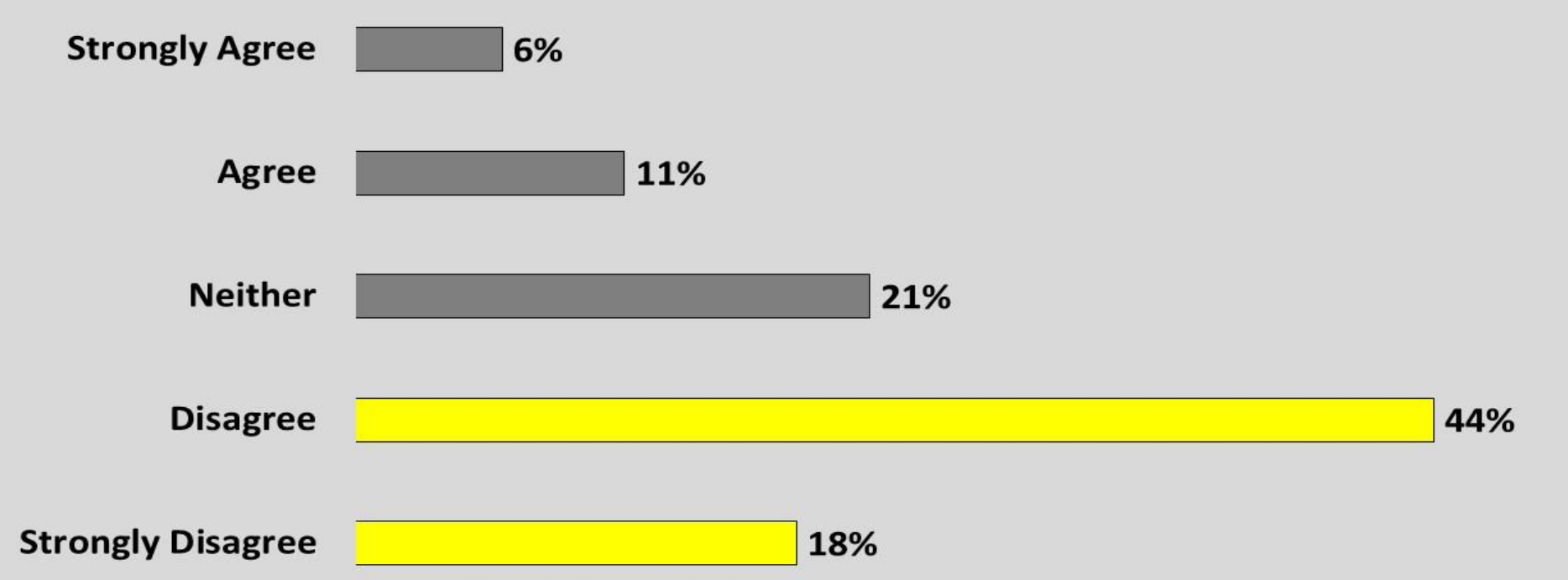
The Capacity Act 2015 is relevant to me



Education and Training

- 76% of respondents had not received any formal training in capacity assessment since graduation from university. This was highest among lower medical grades: Interns (83%) and SHOs (86%).
- 90% of respondents would like to see the HSE or postgraduate training body provide education on capacity assessment

I am satisfied with levels of training I have received in undertaking capacity assessment



Discussion

- Lack of confidence among medical practitioners in undertaking capacity assessments.
- The results of this study are similar to others conducted in UK and New Zealand, which have a similar legal framework with regard to capacity.
- Respondents' lack of awareness as to situations when a capacity assessment should be undertaken has implications for patient safety and risk.
- Capacity assessments are often required in acute medical settings when patients may seek to decline treatment or discharge against medical advice. Complex capacity issues arise where there is a divergence between the patient and medical advice with regard to homecare or discharge issues.
- The prevalence of mental incapacity in acute healthcare settings which is an issue in up to a third of patients demonstrates the importance of this topic for clinicians.^{5,6}
- While the basic principles of capacity assessment will remain unchanged, the legal framework guiding these assessments will be more complex and may lead to an increased apprehension on the part of clinicians with regard to their role in the process.
- While there is an awareness of the Capacity Act 2015, clinicians do not feel prepared for its implementation.
- While liaison psychiatry services have a role in assessing capacity and providing guidance to medical and surgical colleagues in complex cases within the hospital setting, all clinicians should have skills in this area.
- There is clear need identified for a specific training programme for clinicians in the area of capacity assessment and the Capacity Act. This should be devised at national level to ensure nationwide standardisation.
- This programme should ideally be developed by the HSE with input from physicians and psychiatrists.

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Data previously presented at Royal Academy of Medicine in Ireland.
Psychiatry, HST Competition. December 2021



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