The UK Foundation Programme Office

Planning Your Medical Career: A practical guide

You've always wanted to be a doctor – but what *kind* of doctor?

Medicine offers a wide range of choices and can be a highly rewarding career. But finding the right path requires careful thought and planning, and you may need to make some difficult choices along the way. In this leaflet, you will discover some key principles which will help guide you through your career thinking. You'll also find a list of the people in medical and foundation schools who can give you advice and support throughout your training, together with some online resources which you may find useful.

What should I aim for?

The 'perfect career' will look very different to different people – it is unique to you. Perhaps start by asking yourself the following questions, all of which can help guide you towards the career path that's right for you:

- What do you define as rewarding work?
- What kinds of achievement are most important to you?
- What work/life factors do you wish to balance?
- What skills and interests do you have and want to optimise?
- Are there specific types of work and team environments which you prefer?
- What practical factors are important to you i.e. finances, location etc?

Some doctors may go directly into specialty or GP training, while others will choose to gain more general experience either in the UK or overseas. Neither of these is the 'right' way to start your medical career, it's simply a case of doing what's right for you.

Coping with change

It is a rare (or lucky!) doctor who can honestly say that they ended up in the career they first aspired to when starting medical school. Throughout your life priorities change and the unexpected can happen. Consequently, your goals and options may change which can significantly influence your career choices.

You may consider flexible training if you do not wish to pursue a career full-time. This could be for many reasons including:

- being the parent of a young child/children;
- caring for an ill or disabled relative;
- having a disability; or
- having a health problem.

If you do choose to request flexible training, be aware that your request will need discussion with your foundation school director or postgraduate dean to find out what your options are.

Be flexible

There are many great opportunities in medicine and there is often a range of pathways available to reach a long term goal.

Be realistic

A career dream is great to have, but it may only be attainable within the context of the job market and your personal circumstances.

And never, ever be without a Plan B!

So where do I start?

Try structuring your career planning and decision-making to encompass four clear stages.

1. Self assessment (history)

Explore your career values, motivators, preferences, personal strengths and limitations. Some deaneries use career planning tools like Sci59 or Myers Briggs which could help you understand yourself better and can point you in the direction of a career that might suit you.

2. Career exploration (examination & investigations)

Establish your options, alternatives and Plan Bs; gather information, network and reality check. If you're interested in a certain specialty but haven't had the chance to experience it yet – get out there and organise a taster! Perhaps speak to someone who has undergone a taster in that specialty and find out how they went about it. Check out the Guidance on Specialty Tasters for Foundation Trainees document on the UKFPO website for more information. But above all – be proactive!

3. Decision making (diagnosis)

Evaluate your options, map skills and attributes against actual roles, consider options and preferences, clarify personal factors and make choices.

4. Plan implementation (treatment plan)

Undertake detailed research into posts applied for, update your CV, complete applications, prepare for assessments and interviews.

Based on 'The Roads to Success: A Practical Approach to Career Planning for Medical Students, Foundation Trainees (and their Supervisors)', by Elton, C. and Reid, J., Scribe Publications, 2008.

Be careful not to miss the first two stages. Remember, you would not jump straight to a diagnosis when dealing with your patients! Using this framework will help you to seek advice and information from local foundation schools and deanery career advisors in an organised way. If approaching someone for career help you should:

- tell them what your current goals are
- tell them which of the four stages you need help with.

This will put the advisor in a better position to help you.

Advice and Support

You will have the opportunity to discuss and reflect on your career plans when reviewing your portfolio with your educational supervisor. If you want advice or information on different careers, you can talk to any of the following who will be happy to help:

- Educational supervisor
- Foundation programme director
- Postgraduate centre manager
- Clinical tutor
- Royal college tutor
- Deanery or university careers advisor.

Medical Careers and Specialty Information

There is no right or wrong path in medicine. Be prepared for change, and remember that experiences, whether good or bad, are never a waste of time. They all contribute to your development as a doctor. You may not reach the destination you first set out for, but this doesn't make the journey any less valuable. Make the most of the opportunities available to you, gain as much experience as possible, and most of all ensure you end up in a career that matches your aspirations, as well as the needs of the health service.

Resources

www.foundationprogramme.nhs.uk

All the information you need about opportunities in the Foundation Programme, plus details of local career advisors and career fairs is available here in the "Careers Advice" section. The website also has information on national careers fairs.

www.medicalcareers.nhs.uk

The most comprehensive UK medical careers website, supported by the Department of Health, all deaneries, royal colleges and the UKFPO. Includes a complete medical career planning and information resource and those providing formal or informal career support plus links to all royal medical college websites.

www.mmc.nhs.uk

Website dedicated to supporting doctors in applying for specialty training, and providing information on changes to the recruitment and training process. The website includes person specifications for all the specialties and competition ratios.

www.nhscareers.nhs.uk

The information service for anyone pursuing a career in the NHS, including information on career options, grades, and pay and benefits.

www.careers.bmj.com/careers/advice/advice-overview.html

UK and other job vacancies, career alternatives, advice and FAQ's from the publishers of BMJ Careers.

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