

Why I am pursuing a career in general practice

DISCUSSION

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General practice is in a recruitment crisis. 2015 saw 28% of UK GP training posts unfilled after the first round of recruitment, with some of the worst affected areas reporting vacancy rates of over 60%. (1) The question is, why has general practice become so unpopular?

When I told some of my colleagues at medical school I wanted to become a GP, I received several negative responses. “Oh really?” and “but you have such potential”, are prime examples of such reactions, playing to an assumption that becoming anything other than a consultant surgeon or consultant physician is somehow taking ‘the easy route’. This misconception that general practice is a ‘lesser’ career than other specialities appears to be widespread throughout UK medical schools, (2) and is likely to be contributing towards the recruitment crisis in the field.

Personally, I feel that general practice has a lot to offer. As a GP, all manner of symptoms, conditions and patients can present themselves to you in the space of a morning, and distinguishing between minor ailments and serious pathology takes great concentration and attention to detail. The variety of clinical care that GPs offer is also immense: you could be dealing with a paediatric cardiology case in the morning, a middle-aged sports injury in the afternoon and finally reviewing an end of life patient in the evening. This diversity in workload, combined with the continuity of caring for an individual patient over a prolonged period, and often through multiple disease processes, are some of the main reasons why I want to become a GP. Additionally, I am attracted to the excellent opportunities to develop in-depth knowledge in a field of my choosing through becoming a GP with a Special Interest (GPwSI), enabling me to run dedicated clinics in primary care, while still retaining the breadth of care that general practice offers.

GPs are masters of multitasking and many spend part of their working week fulfilling supplementary duties. As all UK medical students will have a GP placement, there are vast opportunities for involvement in medical education. Research into primary care is also an ever-growing field. With reports that 90% of all NHS contact occur in general practice, (3) the discipline offers great scope for contributing to research that will improve patient care on a massive scale. There are also opportunities to sit on commissioning boards, helping to decide how we allocate our limited NHS funds and influencing national policies. Furthermore, there are plenty of opportunities for out of hours work and dealing with acute medical issues within the emergency services, for example, as an ambulance doctor. General practice also offers greater autonomy over how, where and when you work compared to other specialities. Whereas there might be only one training post for paediatric cardiac surgery in one part of the country, GP recruitment occurs throughout the UK. Considering this wealth of opportunity, general practice, to me, appears far from an 'easy route' towards a dead end, but rather a springboard into a fulfilling, diverse and stimulating career of my own shaping.

Undeniably, there are tough times ahead for all medical professionals, but I am proud to be pursuing a career in general practice and I encourage all medical students to give it some serious thought. Irrespective of whether general practice is the right option for you or not, it is essential that we maintain our professionalism and refuse to buy into myths about one field being superior to another. It is imperative that we enable one another to feel confident in our career choices and empowered to base them on what, ultimately, works best for us as individuals. In essence, we must respect and support our colleagues, no matter what speciality they choose to train in.

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