

So you want to be ... a public health physician

Public health has been defined as ‘the science and art of preventing disease, prolonging life and promoting health through the organised efforts and informed choices of society, organisations, public and private, communities and individuals.’ (Wanless, 2003).

Public health encompasses disciplines including clinical medicine, social sciences, policy making, ethics, law and epidemiology, and has a strong academic base. It looks at the bigger picture of health, as illustrated by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (1999) list of public health achievements of the twentieth century which includes vaccination, motor vehicle safety and fluoridation of drinking water.

What does a public health doctor do day-to-day?

Public health doctors work towards enacting large-scale change to improve the population’s health. Most are based in primary care trusts and support the executive board in reaching decisions about which health services to fund. The work follows a project management format, and involves working with multiple professions within and outside the NHS. On a daily basis you will review guidelines, search scientific literature, compile and analyse data, sit on various panels, and communicate with a multitude of stakeholders.

In health protection units, your task is to monitor infectious diseases and contain any outbreaks. There is reactive on-call work, when you provide advice on notified diseases, as well as strategic work such as pandemic flu planning or major environmental disaster planning.

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What skills would I need?

Useful foundation rotations might include time in a primary care trust or health protection unit, general practice, infectious diseases or academia, but also any time spent understanding the clinical realities and workings of the NHS.

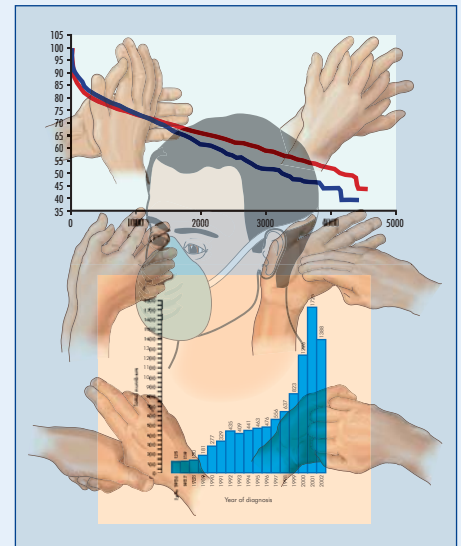
A considerable part of your work involves preparing written reports, giving presentations to broad audiences, meeting health-care professionals and patients, and working with the media. This requires highly developed project management and communication skills, so previous experience of this is useful. Organizational skills are essential as you are likely to be working on several different projects at a time. Numeracy skills are desirable for data analysis.

Finally, public health requires strategic thinking and long-term vision. Day-to-day decision making is a balancing act of individual patient *vs* public interest. Therefore, public health is probably the medical discipline where leadership skills are the most highly valued, and will be increasingly so in the future.

Training and opportunities

As with other clinical training posts, they are offered through the postgraduate deaneries with standard length of training around 5 years. The first 3 years of training are split between a primary care trust (12–18 months) and a health protection unit (3–4 months). Many deaneries fund you to undertake a master’s degree in public health in the first 3 years of your rotation if you do not have one.

Progress on the scheme requires passing both parts of the Membership of the Faculty of Public Health examinations. From ST4 onwards, you will undertake senior and specialist placements to develop your sub-specialty within public health. You may consider ‘national treasure’ posts such as those at the Department of Health, Health Protection Agency, Department for International Development or London Health Observatory as well as placements in academic departments and think tanks (e.g. Nuffield Trust, King’s Fund) depend-



ing on where your long-term career aspirations lie and training progress.

Academic training programmes under the Walport academic clinical fellow and clinical lecturer scheme are also offered with out of programme experience to be taken within 3 years of starting the scheme.

After completing the training scheme, most trainees become public health consultants and some become directors of public health. Other outcomes include working at regional or national government level (the Chief Medical Officer was once a public health specialist registrar), clinical lectureships and private consultancy work. **BJHM**

Conflict of interest: none.

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (1999) Ten great public health achievements – United States, 1900–1999. *MMWR Morb Mortal Wkly Rep* 48(12): 241–3

Wanless D (2003) *Securing Good Health for the Whole Population*. Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, Norwich (www.hm-treasury.gov.uk/wanless accessed 6 July 2009)

Useful websites

www.fphm.org.uk
www.publichealthconferences.org.uk/careers/
www.publichealthy.com/

KEY POINTS

- Public health plays a key role in preventing disease, prolonging lives and promoting health.
- Specializing in public health provides training to bring about population level changes that will benefit a large number of individuals.
- There is excellent scope for developing health leadership skills at local, national and international level.