

CAREERS CLINIC

How should I choose my specialty?

For those feeling under pressure to make a decision about what path to follow after the foundation programme, advisers working with Health Education England offer guidance



“Do a systematic analysis, but don’t ignore intuition”

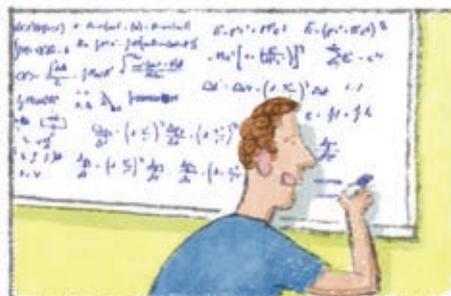
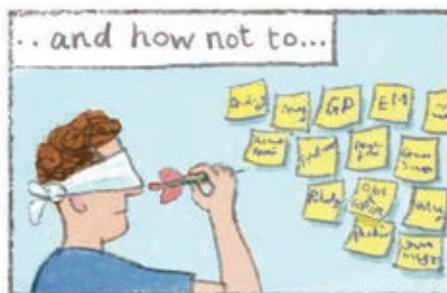
Gilly Freedman, independent career coach

“It’s worth giving time and reflection to your decision as it will have a big impact on your career and your life. Self assessment is crucial in this process. An introduction to career planning can be found on the Health Careers website (www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/career-planning/planning-your-career). This can help you to identify your key values and interests as well as those skills that you are good at and would like to use more—helping you get greater clarity.

These areas will form the basis of a personal summary and give you a list of weighted career priorities, against which you can match specialties that you have enjoyed.

“For those specialties that interest you and you haven’t yet experienced, there are plenty of ways to get information. Face to face networking with educational supervisors, programme directors, former peers, or lecturers is an excellent way of getting the ‘inside story,’ along with shadowing, tasters, and attending conferences and events.

“The Specialty Training website (<https://specialtytraining.hee.nhs.uk>) has information on person specs, competition rates, training pathways, and application deadlines. While doing a systematic analysis of options, don’t ignore your intuition—research shows that both are valid for decision making.”



“Remember you are not signing up to anything for life”

Lisa Stone, freelance careers adviser

“A good starting point would be to reflect on what you have really enjoyed during medical school and your training. Consider the environment—for example, do you like working in a community setting, or do you prefer a hospital? What other aspects have you enjoyed: variety, patient continuity, being a generalist or an expert?

“Next, think about the options that will match some of these aspects. Websites such as www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/Explore-roles have information on roles available. Bear in mind the lifestyle you would like to lead. How flexible is the specialty? Are there chances of going part time, if that’s what you want? If the specialty is competitive, then are you prepared to move where the roles are? Talking to people in those roles is key to discovering more about them.

“Then it’s worth making a list of the specialties you are considering. You can try making a pros and cons list, or listening to your gut feeling. Talking over your thoughts with a friend or a careers consultant can help.

“Remember dedicating yourself to a training programme doesn’t mean that you have to sign up to it for life. You can swap specialties, you can also take some time out to do something different, such as a clinical fellowship, further study, or a gap year.”



“Ask current trainees about their experiences”

Clare Kennedy, specialty recruitment manager

“There is a wealth of information available that could help to inform your decision. Consider carefully the likely levels of competition and be prepared to be flexible in your career choices; not all applicants will get a place in their first choice specialty or region. While competition ratios can’t tell you what will happen with this year’s recruitment, it will give you an indication of historical trends.

“Person specifications will tell you what the eligibility requirements are for each specialty. Once you have a shortlist, speak to trainees who are already undertaking the post. Ask them what their expectations were and whether the training programme has met their expectations.

“There is nothing to stop you applying for a different specialty at a later date, providing you still meet the eligibility criteria. Many core competences are common across specialty curriculums. Competences gained in core, specialty, or general practice training should not have to be repeated, if already achieved.

“The Academy of Medical Royal Colleges has developed a framework to assist trainee doctors in transferring competences to another training programme, though accreditation is not available for all specialties.”

Free career advice sessions at the BMJ Careers Fair. BMJ Careers, in partnership with Health Education England, will be offering free careers advice at the BMJ Careers Fair on 20-21 October at the Business Design Centre in Islington, London. These sessions will be 15 minute one-to-one career advice with a fully qualified adviser. This will give you the chance to talk and be listened to by a skilled and impartial professional.



Nazneen Rahman is professor of human genetics at the Institute of Cancer Research in London and head of the Cancer Genetics Unit at the Royal Marsden Hospital. Her research identifies and makes clinical use of human disease genes. An expert in cancer predisposition genes, she has discovered many such genes during her career, particularly in breast, ovarian, and childhood cancers. She qualified in medicine at Oxford and earned her PhD in molecular genetics. Rahman also writes and sings songs, having released two jazz influenced albums. Science and music, she says, are like "swimming in infinity pools of possibility, but within structures that keep me from drowning."

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Nazneen Rahman In tune with genetics

What was your earliest ambition?

To be a gymnast. I was a passionate Nadia Comaneci fan.

What was your best career move?

Doing a PhD in molecular genetics under Mike Stratton, just as he was discovering the *BRCA2* gene.

What was the worst mistake in your career?

It's hard to pick just one. I often make mistakes, but I've never tried to rank them.

How is your work-life balance?

Better than average, I suspect, although more from necessity than discipline.

How do you keep fit and healthy?

I run, do yoga, go to exercise classes, and walk a lot—it's my favourite mode of transport. And I eat fairly healthily, because I love to cook.

What single change would you like to see made to the NHS?

Basic technology at the heart of the NHS. No more faxes; email rather than snail mail; and fully digital records. It would save so much time and money.

What do you wish that you had known when you were younger?

How overoptimistic I am in judging how long it takes me to do things.

What do you usually wear to work?

A dress, often patterned or brightly coloured because it makes me happy.

What single change has made the most difference in your field?

Sequencing the human genome. There's a pervasive narrative that it somehow underdelivered, that it wasn't worth the money. That's not true. In my field, it's been as transformative as electricity. Every single day, the visionary decision to sequence the human genome makes a difference to my science and my practice.

What new technology or development are you most looking forward to?

I'm very excited about the potential for machine learning and artificial intelligence to improve science and medicine.

What book should every doctor read?

Thinking, Fast and Slow by Daniel Kahneman. Read it!

What is your guiltiest pleasure?

Puzzle games: I waste many, many hours on my iPhone.

Where are you happiest?

Recording songs in the studio. When I'm embraced in multitudinous musical layers, the outside world doesn't exist.

What television programmes do you like?

I'm an unashamed TV lover, and I'm not very discerning. I've recently discovered Netflix box sets, which automatically go on to the next episode. Very dangerous...

What personal ambition do you still have?

I've had a lifelong ambition similar to Barack Obama's philosophy: "Be useful, and be kind."

If you weren't in your present position what would you be doing instead?

Running a philanthropic foundation to help reduce global inequality.

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