

I'm not happy—should I change specialty?

Three experts from Health Education England's professional support unit tell **Abi Rimmer** what you can do if you think you may have chosen the wrong specialty



“Take a step back”
Kathleen Sullivan,
 senior coach,
 professional support unit

“It can be reassuring to know that it isn’t unusual to have doubts about a specialty choice—even fairly late in training. If you’re unsure about what to do next there are many sources of information and advice. The best place to start is with your education supervisor, who can also advise you on who you speak to.

“Contemplating switching specialty can leave you feeling worried about ‘getting it wrong’ again. Rather than rushing your decision, take a step back. Ask yourself, ‘which aspects of my professional and personal life have given me the greatest enjoyment, satisfaction, and fulfilment?’ With some probing, you can begin to get a clearer picture of why certain experiences feature more positively than others. Gradually, you can tease out what matters most to you and elicit your core values, skills, strengths, and interests.

“What will begin to emerge is a profile of the sort of doctor you want to be. Giving some thought to how your personality and what you find stressful could impact on your working life might also flag up useful criteria for further exploration. These factors will come together to provide a foundation that will help you navigate possible directions for your career.



“Do your research”
Jon Fairey,
 senior careers adviser,
 professional support unit

“Knowing what’s important to you and what you want out of your working and non-working life should help narrow down what options are relevant to you. Further research might include a consideration of which specialties support your priorities. The Healthcareers website (www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/explore-Roles/doctors) gives details of specialty working life, training, career pathways, and lifestyle expectations to support both your short and long term planning. You might also want to think about your particular aptitude for different medical careers. The Sci 59 is an online psychometric test that can help you choose a specialty and is available free to BMA members.

“When changing training pathways, it’s worth asking a few questions to help guide the process. For example, how long is the new training programme, is credit given for time spent in your current specialty, and how much competition is there for this specialty. It’s also worth considering how important further academic qualifications are to being successful in your new specialty and how working part time or taking time out impacts on the training programme. Talking to others who have been in a similar position and to those within the specialties you are considering can also be helpful.”



“Think long term”
Katharine Hankins,
 head of careers,
 professional support unit

“Having completed an assessment of what’s important to you and what options best match your career priorities, you may need to decide between a number of possibilities. You might feel that one option is right for you or prefer to use a more systematic approach to making your decision.

“There are a number of different ways to undertake this and you can find exercises to help you on the Healthcareers website.

“What if these exercises don’t provide you with the definitive answer? You might find it helpful to revisit your reasons for changing and check how the new options match up to your current priorities. Which options will fulfil your potential? Are there any aspects that you may find challenging and, if so, what capacity do you have to manage this? What opportunities may unfold once you have completed training?

“Leaving something you have devoted a significant amount of time to can be a daunting prospect and it may help to have a longer careers discussion with someone you trust, such as your educational supervisor, careers advisor, or the training programme director of the specialty you’re interested in.”

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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 19-20 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.



Karen Kirkham, a Dorset GP who has been instrumental in creating a new care system for the county, was appointed national clinical adviser in primary care for NHS England in May 2018. She trained at Middlesex Hospital Medical School, has been a GP for 25 years, and is a partner at the Bridges Medical Centre in Weymouth. The Dorset plan, launched in 2015, remodelled the delivery of care by integrating primary, secondary, and social care and by creating 10 community hubs to coordinate and deliver out-of-hospital care for frail patients. One aim was to identify patients at risk of admission and prevent this where possible through better community care. Kirkham now has the task of spreading this message to other parts of England.

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Karen Kirkham Community hub pioneer

What was your earliest ambition?

From about age 7 I knew that I wanted to be a doctor—never any doubt.

What was your best career move?

Taking the leap at the Dorset clinical commissioning groups' inception. I've relished the challenge of transforming care at such a critical time for the NHS.

How is your work-life balance?

Not that great! I work very long hours, as do many of my NHS colleagues. That said, "work hard and play hard" has always been my mantra.

How do you keep fit and healthy?

I eat well, try to watch my weight, and train two or three times a week in the gym, even when it's the last thing I feel like doing. Weight training and boxing.

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

Focusing on our workforce and changing the culture. If we concentrate on leadership, quality, and development we can bring back the joy of work for many.

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

That I'd make mistakes—and how to deal with them personally.

To whom would you most like to apologise?

Any patients who felt as though I hadn't given them what they expected. Some will have unreasonable expectations, but I've always tried my very best for them.

Which living doctor do you most admire, and why?

Bruce Keogh has shown leadership, vision, and clinical excellence. He's done so much to improve outcomes for people.

What is the worst job you have done?

In terms of sheer exhaustion this would be my first house job: surgery at the Whittington Hospital in 1989 with a 1:2 shift pattern I wouldn't wish on anyone.

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

As a female doctor and having spent so much of my life looking after women's diseases and sexual health, the intrauterine contraceptive system.

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

Artificial intelligence as an aid to clinical practice.

Where are or when were you happiest?

At medical school in the '80s, and now with my family and friends.

What personal ambition do you still have?

To work in some developing countries, maybe in Africa.

What is your pet hate?

Poor grammar.

What poem, song, or passage of prose would you like at your funeral?

What a Wonderful World by Louis Armstrong.

Is the thought of retirement a dream or a nightmare?

By the time it comes it will be wonderful, with travel to remote parts of the globe.

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

Probably another leadership role in the NHS: I don't think that my work is done.

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