

Supporting the future NHS medical workforce: a place-based approach

Dr Liz Brewster and the Mapping Underdoctored Areas team

Policy Context

Building an NHS fit for the future requires a balanced workforce to meet patient needs. Some areas struggle more than others to recruit doctors. Workforce planning and the medical training pathways supplying the required number of doctors to care for the population's health is crucial to improving NHS services. The current system leads to longer waiting lists, delayed diagnoses and greater difficulties getting GP appointments in some areas. It further entrenches health inequalities. Workforce planning and the medical training pathways supplying the required number of doctors to care for the population's health needs a more place-based approach to be successful.

Key research findings

To reduce health inequalities and improve the experience for patients and staff, overlapping medical workforce issues need tackling. Medical schools need recruit the right students to be future doctors. Postgraduate medical training requires reform to support doctors. Medical careers need to be more flexible so that experienced doctors stay in the NHS.

- **Workforce planning has not accounted for how the medical workforce is changing.** We have interviewed 100 doctors at all career stages to understand what structural, organisational and individual factors impact on where doctors live and work.
- **Medical training pathways are not sufficiently flexible.** New doctors frequently have to choose between pursuing a career at the expense of family life. Postgraduate medical training requires doctors to be the most flexible when, for many social groups, they are the least able to be flexible.
- **Workforce planning has not accounted for doctors who do not progress neatly through constrained training pathways.** This makes the projected pipeline more unpredictable.
- **Under-represented groups are disadvantaged in access to medical careers.** Analysis of national medical education data has shown that gender, ethnicity and socio-economic status are predictors of future medical work patterns and career trajectories, including specialty.
- **Patients have difficulties in accessing care because clinical workforce inequalities remain entrenched despite decades of reform.** Policy implementation analysis has shown that national policy-making which is not joined up has inadvertently created 'cold spots' of recruitment.
- **There is sometimes a trade-off between meeting patient need and providing fulfilling medical careers.** Medical training pathways require reform to rebalance this and existing regional initiatives may provide a blueprint.
- **Where medical students and junior doctors train has a formative effect on their future career decision making.** Across cohorts of students and doctors such experiences have profound impacts on health inequalities.

Policy recommendations

- The Department for Health and Social Care should recognise the changing needs of the workforce and create more flexible medical training pathways.
- Future workforce planning and service models requires a more integrated, joined-up approach, reflecting the complexity of the training pathway and its different stages.
- Regional leaders in the NHS need to be empowered to take action on recruitment and retention to overcome workforce 'cold spots' and meet local population need.
- More 'family friendly' policies are required across the NHS, to account for the specific patterns of medical careers, with attention on out-of-hours childcare provision and rota flexibility.
- NHS Employers should commit to actions such as improvements to working environments and organisation culture that are focused on retention, particularly of under-represented groups.
- The government should develop metrics to allow NHS organisations to monitor and support the long-term career development of under-represented groups in medicine.
- When making resourcing decisions, far greater consideration should be given to areas that experience significant health inequalities that struggle to recruit and retain doctors.

Work with the MapDoc team

Dr Liz Brewster is a Senior Lecturer in Medical Education at Lancaster University. She leads the study: *Mapping underdoctored areas: the impact of medical training pathways on NHS workforce distribution and health inequalities*. The research aims to identify the impact of medical training pathways on workforce distribution proposing how, when and where interventions might be facilitated to improve outcomes.

This research is funded by National Institute for Health and Social Care Research (NIHR). The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NIHR or the Department of Health and Social Care.

Contact Dr Brewster at e.brewster@lancaster.ac.uk if you would like to learn more about the research, invite a member of the team to speak at your event, or collaborate with the team to improve your workforce initiatives.

www.lancaster.ac.uk/mappingdoctors

