

# Have you considered a career in public health medicine?

(based on *Public Health: specialise in 'the bigger picture'*. [www.fph.org.uk](http://www.fph.org.uk) )

## Is public health for me?

Public health requires a passion for improving health and reducing inequalities in health. You will be interested in why people become ill, how this can be prevented, as well as how they can be treated. You will also be interested in how organisations and society can be changed to bring about better health.

Examples of recent priorities for public health work include reducing smoking rates and protecting people from environmental tobacco smoke, looking at ways of reducing obesity and alcohol consumption, and new ways of delivering health care.

Tackling these kinds of problems means working with people from all kinds of backgrounds, managing big budgets and staff, and being a passionate advocate for change. This sort of work often has long timescales, as results may take years to achieve, but if you have the enthusiasm and drive to carry you through, your work can have a lasting impact on many thousands of people.

## What is public health?

Public health is about improving and protecting the health of groups of people, rather than about treating individual patients. Public health consultants must look at 'the bigger picture' and then take action to promote healthy lifestyles, prevent disease, protect and improve general health, and improve healthcare services. The 'population' they are working for could be a rural community, an entire city, or the global population, but the principles remain the same.

Definitions of public health include:

*'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'*

*'What we as a society do collectively to ensure the conditions in which people can be healthy'*

The practice of public health includes:

- monitoring population health and the determinants of health;
- identifying and assessing health needs, problems and risk factors in a population;
- developing interventions and policies to address these issues;
- health promotion;
- protection of the environment;
- evaluating and assuring solutions and services to address health problems;
- informing, educating and empowering people about health issues.

### ***What is a consultant in public health medicine?***

Public health consultants strive to make the population and the environment healthier. They are 'upstream thinkers' – preventing people from being thrown into the river in the first place, rather than fishing them out downstream, coughing and spluttering.

Public health medicine brings together skills and people from a wide range of disciplines. Most public health consultants in Ireland work in the HSE in the Population Health directorate. The Population Health approach is to promote and protect the health of the whole population or sub-groups, with particular emphasis on reducing health inequalities.

Other consultants work for national agencies, such as the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, and in universities. Others work in international agencies such as the World Health Organisation, and for international development agencies. Most doctors who specialise in public health medicine work in the public sector, but a small number work in the private sector.

### ***What does the work of a consultant in public health medicines involve?***

Leaders in public health must be diverse in their capabilities: creative in their ability to visualise change, meticulous and organised in making it happen, and in monitoring the results.

They take on the challenge of extremely varied and often unpredictable workloads. Timescales for getting projects up and running can be long and require a great deal of negotiation, but a good public health consultant will be able to handle the challenge of this, providing the leadership and management skills necessary to see projects through to completion. They seldom, if ever, work on one project at a time, and must also be able to respond to emergencies as they arise.

To do the job, they must have a broad understanding of all the factors that contribute to health, the structure of healthcare systems and services, government policy, and how to effectively interpret available data. They have to evaluate evidence to devise and implement strategies to improve and protect health, and to improve health services. Public health consultants need to be both tough negotiators and simultaneously possess good powers of persuasion to get the community, other stakeholder organisations and politicians to agree and work effectively towards common goals.

Some consultants will become experts in a specific area of public health, while others will find that their job incorporates a cross-section of public health activities and research. However, their work usually falls within one or all of the following three domains:

- improving health
- protecting health
- developing and improving health services

These are underpinned by surveillance and monitoring of health and the determinants of health.

## The Domains of Public Health Medicine

Health Protection	Health Service Development	Health Improvement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Disease and injury prevention</li> <li>• Communicable disease control</li> <li>• Protection from environmental hazards</li> <li>• Emergency planning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service planning</li> <li>• Clinical effectiveness</li> <li>• Clinical governance and risk management</li> <li>• Efficiency (including value for money)</li> <li>• Audit and evaluation</li> <li>• Change management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health Promotion</li> <li>• Reducing Inequalities</li> <li>• Advocacy on Socio-economic issues</li> <li>• Education</li> <li>• Lifestyles</li> <li>• Community development</li> </ul>
<p>Surveillance and monitoring of health and the determinants of health underpins all three domains.</p>		

### ***Health improvement***

Individual behaviour is not the only factor that contributes to a person's state of 'wellness'; a complex set of social, economic, political and environmental factors influence this. These 'wider determinants' are vitally important to health.

Improving health therefore also means reducing inequalities in society and improving access to education, housing and employment. Although these areas have traditionally been beyond the scope of the health service, they have such a great impact on the health of the population that they can no longer be ignored.

Public health consultants must work with the community, other relevant organisations and politicians to develop and implement local and national policies to encourage healthy lifestyle choices and reduce risk factors. They must then monitor and evaluate how effective their strategies are through the surveillance of diseases and risk factors.

### ***Health protection***

Infectious diseases, chemicals and radiation are among the factors that can threaten the health of a large portion of any given population. Public health consultants must understand and continually monitor these threats and plan and manage prevention strategies, and any required emergency responses. Environmental health hazards, such as flooding and pollution, are other possible dangers that they may have to deal with.

Some consultants choose to develop a special interest in health protection issues.

### ***Improving and developing health and social services***

A public health consultant working to improve health and social care services must continually take stock of the health and social care needs of their population, as well as the efficiency and effectiveness of the services that they have access to.

Managing and improving healthcare services requires leadership skills and strategic decision-making to improve the systems in place.

### **Key skills and knowledge**

Epidemiology is the cornerstone of public health practice. This is the study of the distribution and causes of a disease or state of health, and the use of this information for action to prevent or control health problems and diseases.

Other core skills and areas of knowledge which are essential to public health consultants include:

- Quantitative and qualitative research methods
- Managing health information, including sources and uses of data, analysis and practical application
- Statistics
- Demography
- Medical sociology
- Social policy
- Health economics
- Budgeting
- Health care evaluation
- Non-communicable disease and injury control and prevention
- Communicable disease control and prevention
- Environmental health
- Leadership and people management
- Health needs assessment
- Health impact assessment
- Health equity
- Critical appraisal
- Risk assessment
- Management of health services including health service organisation, strategy and policy development, planning, audit, effectiveness and outcome assessment

### **Career prospects**

Most public health physicians work as consultants in the HSE. Many public health consultants change jobs several times in the course of their career, taking on different challenges in a way that clinical medicine seldom offers. There is also great scope to practise abroad, particularly both in developed and in developing countries.

### ***What is the future of the specialty?***

There will be a need for consultants in public health medicine for as long as there are avoidable health problems and health inequalities to be tackled. The nature of public health practice is changing as the nature of the major health problems changes: preventable chronic diseases are now increasingly competing with infections. With the growing problems of HIV and emerging infections, antimicrobial resistance and the threat of a flu pandemic, public health is renewing old skills while learning new ones.

A recent review of the public health medicine workforce demonstrates the need to train new consultants to meet the future demand.

## **Training in public health medicine**

### ***Entry requirements to the Specialist Registrar programme***

Higher medical training (HMT) in the Faculty of Public Health Medicine of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland is open to fully registered medical doctors who have obtained a certificate of completion of General Professional Training or Basic Surgical Training and who have passed Part I of the Membership of the Faculty of Public Health Medicine of the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland (MFPHMI). Graduates of non-Irish/UK medical schools without the Part I MFPHMI or MFPH (UK) who compete for HMT posts must provide evidence of knowledge, training and qualifications equivalent to Part I MFPHMI or MFPH (UK) standard. Most entrants will have completed a Masters in Public Health (MPH) or similar postgraduate degree course.

### ***What knowledge and skills do I need to apply?***

- An understanding of, and commitment to, public health and its application
- Good verbal and written communication skills – the ability to listen, present, facilitate and negotiate effectively, and to adapt language usage appropriately to the setting
- Good team working and leadership skills – working in multidisciplinary, non-hierarchical structures and in a collaborative manner
- A broad, strategic outlook and vision, and the ability to manage change
- Research and critical appraisal skills, with a good understanding of epidemiology and statistics
- Self-reliance and self-motivation
- The ability to prioritise, plan and work on your own initiative
- A desire to keep learning
- Good IT skills

### ***How does the training programme work?***

The typical training programme for specialising in public health medicine is normally four years full time or an equivalent period part-time. Trainees are expected to sit the Faculty of Public Health Medicine of Ireland Part II

membership examination within two years after starting the programme. It must be completed within the four years.

The training content includes the areas of practice described in *Key Skills and Knowledge* above. Other training experience related to the Specialist Registrar's personal specialist interests, and overseas experiences if applicable, are encouraged provided approval is obtained in advance. Previous experience may reduce training time, if trainees can show the competencies that they have gained through this experience.

Training is organised by the National Speciality Director. During training, trainees will rotate through at least two placements in different regions. This allows trainees the opportunity to develop the skills to meet their chosen career aims.

All trainees are expected to rotate through the Department of Health and Children for at least six months.

Each Specialist Registrar has a named trainer who supervises his/her training. Both agree a training programme which is reviewed and updated quarterly. A written record of training is maintained in a logbook. The logbook forms the basis of an annual assessment and is also examined when deciding on a recommendation to issue a Certificate of Satisfactory Completion of Specialist Training (CSCST). To qualify for a CSCST a Specialist Registrar must have satisfactorily completed HMT based on annual reviews and have been admitted to MFPHMI by examination.

### ***How flexible is training?***

Training in public health is very flexible and encourages trainees to shape their training around their own interests. This involves identifying their interests and skills, even if embryonic, and finding the best ways to develop them.

Part-time training is also possible and trainees may apply for time out of training to work abroad to gain further experience.

### ***Where and when can I apply?***

There is one recruitment drive per year, with the application process starting in November for posts to be taken up in July of the following year.

Advertisements for training posts will be placed in the medical press.

## **Further information**

### **The Faculty of Public Health Medicine of Ireland**

The Faculty has further information and a list of advisers who can advise you on the speciality and on the training programme.

[www.rcpi.ie/](http://www.rcpi.ie/)

Tel 01 863 9700 (ask for Medical Training Office)