

Why Public Health Medicine?



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As medical students and Foundation Year doctors, the time spent in training is almost entirely geared towards the clinical aspects of Medicine. Public Health Medicine (PHM) may be thought of as the invisible thread linking all other specialities together.

The Public Health Specialist is characteristically the doctor who likes to question the status quo, who is dissatisfied with 'dishing' out the same medication but who questions the underlying reasons beneath so much of the same pathology in the population. Understanding the epidemiology of disease and the determinants of disease in our country through research and the maintenance of accurate disease registers is vital for the planning of our health services. Research can take you to unexpected directions and can provide you with the so-required evidence for advocacy, policy formulation and mobilisation of scarce funds where they are most required.

Through one's exposure to clinical medicine, one often encounters inefficiencies in the service and naturally ideas spring to mind as to what could be done better to increase efficiency. Public Health is the speciality for you, if you have an interest in Health Management, Health Economics and aspire to work in the place where the challenging decisions are taken as regards the planning of National Health Service and rationing of funds. If this aspect of Public Health is not really your 'cup of tea' but you feel very strongly about the growing Obesity Epidemic for example, then the sub-speciality of Non-Communicable Diseases may be what attracts you to Public Health Medicine.

The beauty of our work through Health Promotion lies in the fact that enabling a small change of life-style such as quitting smoking or increasing exercise levels in a large number of people results in commensurate benefits to the population health resulting in a greater (and usually cheaper) health improvement than that which can be obtained by treating the individual patient once disease becomes manifest. Our role is to treat our 'patients' at the point in which they develop an unhealthy lifestyle before any irreversible damage may occur to their health let alone before they are manifesting disease. There are a multitude of other Public Health topics of interest such as Environmental Health, Infectious Disease Prevention and Control, Screening Services amongst others that may be of interest.

Yet again if you have often wondered about why we meet with inequalities in health and ill-health, public health offers you the opportunity to explore these health inequalities and to discover the sociological determinants and consequences of both health and ill-health. It will teach you about vulnerable groups and open up avenues for you wherein you can work with other sectors in an effort to redress such situations.

Public Health Medicine is an umbrella term for a whole spectrum of specialities that deal with the health of the population. Contrary to popular belief, it is an extremely sociable, and challenging discipline where although the direct contact with the patient is less or somewhat different as compared to clinical medicine, we still have daily and continuous opportunities for teamwork, interaction with medical and non-medical peers and also significant and growing opportunities for international collaboration.

The Public Health Medicine Training Programme runs over a period of four years leading to the Certificate of Completion of Specialist Training as approved by the Specialists' Accreditation Committee. This includes specified rotations of supervised training within the various departments related to PHM. In addition, there must be a firm commitment to successfully complete a recognised Masters in Public Health at the earliest possible opportunity of starting Public Health Specialist Training.

Since this speciality is different to what you are usually exposed to during your undergraduate training and Foundation years we suggest that you to come on-board for a taster week in order to be able to get a snap shot of each of the different units and key players who work within the different departments of Public Health. We're sure you will find this speciality to be different to what you originally imagined!

Alexia Bezzina (on behalf of the PHM trainees)
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