

Choosing your hospital specialty

As *Shelley Heard* explains, strong competition in some specialties means it may be advisable to consider alternatives

So you have decided that you want to be a cardiologist. You thought carefully about what you enjoyed doing as a medical student and took advice from friends, family, and senior doctors. You had some career discussions in the last year of medical school and everything seemed to suggest that this was the career for you. During your foundation year 1 you paid particular attention to patients with heart problems, and you concentrated your reading in your spare time on cardiology. Although you did not get a specific cardiac placement as part of your foundation year 2 rotation, you saw plenty of patients with heart problems in accident and emergency, in your general practice placement, and while you were doing rheumatology as part of

general medicine. You even did a one week “taster” with the cardiology team and found that really exciting. Yes, this is definitely the specialty for you.

Tough competition

You may be right. But it is also likely to be the specialty that many other people want to do—perhaps for exactly the same reasons. And although the NHS may need lots of cardiologists, not everyone can be one—there are probably more doctors beginning their specialist training who want to be cardiologists than the NHS needs. Tables 1 and 2, provided by the West Midlands and London/Kent, Surrey, and Sussex and Eastern deaneries, show for a selection of specialties the number of applicants for each national training number or general practice placement available between 2002 and 2005. www.mmc.nhs.uk/pages/careers gives the full list. The tables give you an idea of the “relative competitiveness” between specialties in two deaneries and show how competitive entry into the specialties has been over this time. This will, of course, also depend on the number of posts available (in some years no posts were available), but it is a good indication of the historical competitiveness of a specialty.

Table 1 West Midlands Deanery. Number of applicants for each training opportunity from January 2002 to December 2005

Specialty	No of applicants			
	2002	2003	2004	2005
Accident and emergency	8.56	7.38	4.82	4.33
Anaesthetics	3.50	3.09	4.00	14.43
Cardiology	12.50	3.20	8.08	13.20
Cardiothoracic surgery	10.75	22.40	0	0
Genitourinary medicine	0	2.67	0.42	2.17
General practice	0	0	6.20	7.10
General surgery	27.89	13.61	14.77	12.25
Histopathology	8.79	4.00	3.71	2.63
Infectious diseases	5.50	0	7.00	5.00
Medical microbiology	0	2.29	9.00	5.33
Psychotherapy	0	3.00	2.00	2.67
Radiology	21.50	23.63	23.00	35.00
Rheumatology	0	3.40	5.50	3.60

Table 2 London/Kent, Surrey, and Sussex and Eastern deaneries. Number of applicants for each training opportunity from April 2002 to December 2005

Specialty	No of applicants			
	2002/3	2003/4	2004/5	2005/6
Accident and emergency	5.91	3.11	1.94	2.17
Allergy	0	0	1.00	0
Anaesthetics	3.46	2.55	2.15	2.68
Audiological medicine	4.33	7.00	6.00	0
Cardiology	9.37	13.88	5.59	6.00
Cardiothoracic surgery	0	30.86	59.00	41.00
Genitourinary medicine	5.00	1.17	1.92	0
General practice	5.79	6.80	15.65	7.25
General surgery	11.27	11.90	7.74	17.30
Histopathology	4.61	4.68	3.62	3.32
Medical microbiology	4.55	3.91	4.33	8.67
Psychotherapy	4.80	3.38	9.33	5.33
Radiology	5.73	5.28	3.21	3.00
Rheumatology	3.00	1.82	1.80	0

Contingency planning

So what does this mean for you? It means that you need to think realistically about your career prospects and opportunities. You will be able to choose several specialties when the time comes to apply for training after the foundation programme, but it will be important to think carefully about your chances of success. You may need to take into account your personal circumstances if geography rather than specialty is your most important priority. You must think now about your own aptitudes and your chances in a competitive process with colleagues who will also have **their** own aptitudes and aspirations to consider. By all means, have a plan A (for example, cardiology), but you will also need to take into account that others will be competing for the specialty as well. You will therefore need to have plan B (for example, general practice) and a plan C (for example, histopathology). So seek good careers advice: start with your clinical or college tutor, find out as much information about the specialty as you can (deanery and college websites are good sources), and keep an open mind. ■

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With thanks to the West Midlands and London deaneries for providing the data on competition ratios.

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