



Specialty pages

- ▶ Anaesthesia
- ▶ Emergency Medicine
- ▶ General Practice
- ▶ Intensive Care Medicine
- ▶ Medicine
- ▶ Obstetrics and Gynaecology
- ▶ Occupational Medicine
- ▶ Ophthalmology
- ▶ Paediatrics
- ▶ Pathology
- ▶ Psychiatry
- ▶ Public Health**
- ▶ Working Life
- ▶ Personal Characteristics
- ▶ Postgraduate Training Pathway
- ▶ Workforce Statistics
- ▶ Video-cast
- ▶ Case-studies
- ▶ Remuneration
- ▶ Links and Reading
- ▶ Radiology
- ▶ Surgery
- ▶ Workforce Statistics

My Links

[Manage my Links](#)

Home > Specialty pages > Public Health

Public Health



Nature of the work

Public health is about improving the health of large groups of people, rather than treating individual patients. Public health specialists strive to realise ways of making communities and environments healthier and more capable of providing us with what we need for optimal health. The specialty calls for 'upstream thinkers' operating on principles of prevention rather than cure.

Public health consultants must look at the big picture and take action to promote healthy lifestyles, prevent disease, protect and improve general health and improve healthcare services. They could work for a rural community, a city, or the global population.

Working in public health

Specialists take on the challenge of extremely varied and often unpredictable workloads. Specialists have a broad understanding of all the factors that contribute to health, including the structure of healthcare systems and services, current government policy and how to effectively interpret available data. They are skilled at evaluating evidence to devise and implement strategies for improving and protecting health, and health services.

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. They seldom, if ever, work on a single project at a time, and must be able to respond to emergencies as they arise. Public health consultants need to be tough negotiators and possess good powers of persuasion to convince the community, stakeholder organisations and politicians to work effectively towards common goals.

As long as there are health problems and health inequalities there will be a need for public health specialists. The nature of practice has changed, just as the nature of major health problems changes. Preventable chronic diseases are now increasingly competing with infection, but with HIV, drug-resistant bacteria and the threat of a flu pandemic, public health is having to dust off old skills as well as learn new ones.

Common procedures/interventions

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

- improving health
- protecting health
- improving health services.

Associated sub specialities

Health Improvement

Health Protection (including communicable disease control)

Health and Social care quality (including specialised commissioning)

Health Intelligence

Academic Public Health

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