

## Where Are They Now? Five-Year Career Trends in a Single Graduating Medical Class

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Dear Sir,

Significant difficulties with retention and recruitment of medical personnel within the Irish health care system have been reported, particularly since the economic crisis in 2008<sup>1</sup>. We examined the career pathways of Irish medical students investigating patterns of emigration and immigration in one graduating class, in a single medical university, in Ireland, at the five-year post-graduate mark.

Final year medical students in a single university in Ireland in 2013 were asked to state their intended post-graduate career specialty, and at the five year post graduate point current areas of practice were determined.

Responses from the 108 Irish students were included, with 81 direct entry undergraduate students and 27 post-graduate students. Forty-eight (44%) were male. In all, 32.4% (n=35) of doctors had worked abroad during their first five post-graduate years. Direct entry students were more likely to have worked abroad (37% vs 18.5%, p=0.044). At five years, 20 of these 35 graduates (57.1%) remained working abroad. This left 78.7% (85/108) working currently as practicing clinicians in Ireland. Australia was the most popular country for those who had worked overseas (Table 1).

**Table 1: Country of Employment Overseas**

Australia	45.7% (n=16)
New Zealand	25.7% (n=9)
UK	17.1% (n=6)
USA	8.6% (n=3)
Switzerland	2.8% (n=1)

Only 42.9% (n=15) had returned to work in Ireland. No one had returned from either the UK or USA, and none of the graduate entry students had returned. All returning doctors bar one had worked abroad for less than two years.

The fact that nearly 20% of the graduating class are working outside of Ireland at the five-year postgraduate point reflects doctors' views on migration where working conditions, training and career opportunities are perceived to be better abroad than in Ireland<sup>2</sup>.

Our analysis marries up with previous studies that have shown that 40% of Irish medical students anticipated that they would return from abroad within five years<sup>3</sup>. Previous Irish research has framed the possibility of return to Ireland as a 'time-limited window of opportunity' and this is borne out in this study<sup>2</sup>. In our study all except one of the doctors who returned to Ireland to work had worked for less than 2 years abroad. Over time, the possibility that emigration

may be permanent increases, and plans to return home reduces<sup>4</sup>. This study highlights the need for better strategies to effectively retain Irish graduates and to encourage emigrants to return home to the healthcare system.

In summary, this is one of the first studies to follow-up the career preferences of a single graduating class at five years. It shows that while a large proportion emigrate following graduation, nearly half return within five years. Future research should focus on improving data collection so that preferences and trends can be monitored over time. This will help educational authorities and healthcare systems in Ireland and other countries to prepare for migration patterns among recent medical school graduates.

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