



Medical Training Pathways and Underdoctored Areas: A Qualitative Study of Doctors Working in Areas that Struggle to Recruit and Retain.

1. What was the question?

Some areas of England struggle to recruit and keep the doctors they need. These areas are often found in remote or coastal parts of England. Some of these places are also very poor. We call these areas 'underdoctored'. We wondered why doctors who already work in underdoctored places chose to do so. Knowing their reasons might help the NHS improve their recruitment efforts in the future.



2. What did we do?

We interviewed doctors who worked in underdoctored areas and asked them about their careers. Then we used doctors' responses to think about their experience of work. We looked for common reasons why these doctors worked in these areas. Finally, we considered what the NHS could learn from these doctors to support future recruitment.

3. What did we find?

We found that doctors had complex reasons for moving and working in these areas. These reasons included elements of family life, career, and place preference. Doctors often prioritise one factor over the others. We also found that doctors' feelings about a place could change over time, like when they started a family. When choosing where to work, doctors often focused on their family life or career. Some doctors spoke about staying or returning to the place they had grown up. Others moved to a new area to be closer to their partners' family. Doctors often stayed close to family for practical reasons such as childcare. Other doctors focused on their career progression. For these doctors, where they worked mattered less than the type of work. Many doctors who put their career first did not have children or were early on in their training. Some of the doctors we interviewed had come to the UK from abroad. These doctors often did not want to stay in remote or smaller places. They moved to bigger cities to be with other members of their community. It was less common for doctors to prioritise place, but some did. These doctors often spoke of the benefits of living in a certain area. They spoke about these places providing a better quality of life than elsewhere.



4. What does this mean?

The NHS wants to encourage more doctors to move and stay in underdoctored areas. Some things, like doctors' priorities changing over time, are outside of their control. This makes it difficult for the NHS to make sure everywhere has enough doctors. There are more questions the NHS should ask to help them solve this problem. These questions include:

- How can we change doctors' perceptions of underdoctored areas?
- How can we help doctors have a good career and life?
- What changes can we make to encourage doctors to work in these places?

The answers to these questions might help the NHS to recruit more doctors to these areas and encourage them to stay.

This is a summary of: L. Brewster, CK. Chekar, M. Lambert, C. Mumford, T. Patel, N. Rennie, C. Shelton (2025) Medical training pathways and underdoctored areas: a qualitative study of doctors working in areas that struggle to recruit and retain published in *Health & Place*, Vol 96: doi: 10.1016/j.health-place.2025.103560

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