Thinking Out of the Box: Alternative Career Choices for Young Doctors in Pakistan

Faroq Azam Rathore¹ and Fareeha Farooq²

ABSTRACT

The number of young medical graduates in Pakistan is increasing every year. Most of whom wish to specialize in a particular clinical field. Considering the competition faced for specialty training selection and later on for job placement, it is suggested that these young graduates should explore some alternative careers as well. Opportunities can be availed and decision made based on graduates' personal interest, preference to work in Pakistan or abroad, and availability of suitable employment in local and international hospitals among other factors. Careers in the basic medical sciences, medical education, medical research, medical writing and bioethics can be considered, too. There are very few trained professionals in these fields in Pakistan and once trained, these young doctors will hopefully find rewarding employment.

Key Words: Career. Alternate career. Medical doctor.

There are 203,000 doctors registered with Pakistan Medical and Dental Council (PMDC)¹ and more than 90 medical colleges are functioning in Pakistan.² Thousands of young doctors join the graduate pool every year. Some leave the profession, others compete for the Civil Services exam or start their own business, and still others leave the country for advanced medical training for a better future. No data is available to document this phenomenon.

Most of the remaining doctors seek to specialize and complete a fellowship in a specialty field. There are 129 training institutes with more than 10,000 training slots accredited by College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan (CPSP) for postgraduate residency programs.³ Many universities in the country also offer diploma, MD and MS programs in different medical specialties. However, the number of available funded training positions in these specialties is limited. The journey to become a specialist in a particular specialty is a long one, ranging from 4 - 8 years depending upon the specialty; and a longer period if a sub-specialty is pursued. Those who successfully qualify for the Fellow of College of Physicians and Surgeons Pakistan (FCPS) Part II Fellowship program face fierce competition for a job in the public sector. It is not uncommon for doctors with as much as 5 years post-FCPS Part II experience still employed as senior registrars. Establishing oneself in private practice is also very challenging. Due to the current socio-political environment, threats to doctors, political pressures and harassments the doctors avoid serving in the far-flung rural areas.

Given these challenges faced by young doctors in Pakistan, the authors would like to offer some food for thought. Young graduates are encouraged to 'think out of the box' while deciding their future. Potential opportunities can be considered based on personal interest, preference to work in Pakistan or abroad, and availability of suitable employment in local and international hospitals among other factors. This overview provides several alternative careers which deserve consideration by young medical graduates.

1. Medical education: There is a need for medical educationist in every medical college. Of the 96 medical colleges in Pakistan, few have a Department of Medical Education (DME), staffed by professional medical educationists. In the majority of the medical colleges, either there is no DME or the clinicians are managing the department. The clinicians are mostly committed with their patients and teaching responsibilities thus are unable to give full attention to the department. The last decade has seen an increase in the number of degree programs, conferences and workshops on medical education in Pakistan. Different universities, along with CPSP, are running Certificate, Masters and PhD programs. There are many programs in Health Professional Education (HPE) and medical education in Pakistan. The Membership program in HPE (MCPS-HPE) offered by CPSP was launched in 2004 as a 15-month diploma course.⁴ It is one of the pioneer medical education courses in the country. HPE is expected to flourish in future, so young doctors can consider this a reasonable career choice. Medical educationists have excellent prospects abroad as well.
2. Basic medical sciences: For most of the senior physicians, basic medical sciences certainly were no match to the exciting and engaging clinical subjects. This has changed in the last decade. Now basic medical sciences are being integrated with clinical sciences. Clinical correlations of the symptomatology and management protocols are being discussed, keeping in view the pathophysiology and biochemistry involved. The new avenues for research funding in basic medical sciences have also opened up. Because of these changes, basic medical sciences have become more desirable for persons with a scientific interest along side a clinical passion. There are options to do FCPS, Masters or PhD program in basic medical sciences in Pakistan or abroad.

3. Medical research and writing: In 2010, Pakistan ranked 43rd in the world in the scientific publications and is expected to rise to the 27th place by 2018. Scientific-biomedical writing capability is an essential skill one needs as student, trainee and faculty member in order to out rival and excel in today’s current competitive academic environment. Residents and trainees need to engage in medical writing to produce research work. This will help them with the mandatory thesis/ dissertation required as a pre-requisite for the fellowship exam and improve their chances of residency matches abroad. Faculty members are required to guide their students how to publish a certain number of manuscripts for academic promotion. There are more than 76 biomedical journals being published in Pakistan but still the doctors face difficulty in conducting research and writing articles. This skill can enable them to share their work in reputable international biomedical journals.

A physician trained in medical writing can be an asset to any medical college/institute which is interested in building its credibility as a center of excellence in research. She/he can train more healthcare professionals and facilitate DME or research cell. Although there is no accredited certification program in medical research and writing in Pakistan but there are a number of courses being offered all around the world (Table I).

4. Bioethics: Ethical behavior in scientific writing and medical research is a universal standard. There are many documented high profile cases of scientific misconduct and plagiarism where senior researchers and physicians were humiliated and consequently had to resign.

Ethics Review Committee (ERC) or Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval is now mandatory for any original research work. The four leading medical journals of Pakistan ask for an official letter of approval from ERC or IRB for all research articles being submitted. Yet functional ERC is not available in most of the medical colleges and institutes in Pakistan. The posts are usually filled by clinicians and faculty members from the basic medical sciences who only meet occasionally to sign the approval form without much debate and discourse. In fact, one of the authors of this viewpoint had an experience of witnessing an ethic review committee certificate being signed without any formal presentation or meeting of the members.

Currently, there is no formal training to most of the medical students, residents or clinicians regarding different ethical aspects of patient care including patient confidentiality, appropriate dealing with the patient of opposite gender, breaking bad news, ownership of patient while being managed by different specialties and end of life issues etc. Trained bioethics specialist can facilitate and train the doctors and staff regarding different ethical aspects of patient care as well as how to deal with challenging situations.

Trained bioethics specialists can fill this vacuum. Medical colleges and associated hospitals need this essential expertise to function effectively in research. The Centre of Biomedical Ethics and Culture (CBEC) at Sindh Institute of Urology and Transplant, Karachi is the only institution running postgraduate degree program in bioethics in Pakistan. It offers certificate course, diploma and master's degree program in bioethics.

5. Healthcare administration: Healthcare administration is a separate field of specialization all around the globe. Healthcare administrators are also known as medical and health services managers, and healthcare executives. They look after the administrative affairs of the hospital, facilitate the patients, often work closely with medical staff to plan, direct, and coordinate the delivery of healthcare. Though statistics are not available for Pakistan, in the US the median pay of a

---

**Table I: Sample courses on medical and scientific writing.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Course title</th>
<th>Certification available</th>
<th>Fees</th>
<th>Web address</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The American Medical Writers Association Programs</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td><a href="http://www.amwa.org/amwa_certificates">http://www.amwa.org/amwa_certificates</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>European Medical Writers Association Professional Development Programme</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td><a href="http://filenamer.emwa.org/workshops/view_workshops.php">http://filenamer.emwa.org/workshops/view_workshops.php</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certificate in Medical Writing and Editing, University of Chicago, USA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>-</td>
<td><a href="https://grahamschool.uchicago.edu/Noncredit/certificates/medical-writing-editing/index">https://grahamschool.uchicago.edu/Noncredit/certificates/medical-writing-editing/index</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master of Arts in Science Writing, John Hopkins University, USA</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td><a href="http://advanced.jhu.edu/academics/graduate-degree-programs/science-writing">http://advanced.jhu.edu/academics/graduate-degree-programs/science-writing</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The number of fresh medical graduates in Pakistan is on the rise every year. Majority of whom wish to specialize in a particular clinical field. It is very disheartening to see a young graduate leaving the medical profession, after spending so much time and resources on the journey to become a physician. This should be questioned, specially from the physician graduates from a public medical college. Considering the competition faced for specialty training selection and later on for job placement, these young graduates may explore some alternative careers as well. Medical sciences, medical education, medical research and writing, and bioethics should be among those considered opinions.

Acknowledgements: Authors would like to thank and acknowledge the following colleagues for critical revision of the manuscript.

1. Dr. Andrew J. Haig MD, Professor, Department of Physical Medicine and Rehabilitation, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, USA.

2. Dr. James Gosney MD, MPH. Chair, Committee on Rehabilitation Disaster Relief (CRDR), International Society of Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine (ISPRM) Rue François-Versonnex, 7 1207 Geneva Switzerland.

REFERENCES


