Managing Efficiently Future Pandemics

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The Challenges of Being a Locum GP Post COVID-19

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Healthcare education experts at Arora Medical Education explore whether becoming a locum general practitioner (GP) remains a worthwhile career trajectory in a post-pandemic world.

Key Points

- Since 2017, the number of general practitioners working as locums has increased significantly.
- Locum GPs face numerous challenges including financial uncertainty and isolation. These challenges were exacerbated by COVID-19.
- In this article, we explore the challenges faced by locum GPs over the course of the pandemic, and question whether a career as a locum still has benefits in a post-pandemic world.

Over the last decade, the number of licensed doctors working as locums has increased dramatically. It is estimated that 1 in 5 UK doctors currently work in a locum capacity. With such a significant presence, it is evident that locum doctors occupy an integral role in both the NHS and private medical sector. As the UK emerges from the pandemic, however, many locum doctors, and locum general practitioners, in particular, feel neglected by the healthcare industry.

The rapid transmission of COVID-19 challenged the NHS like never before. As cases increased and hospital admissions soared, much media and think tank analysis naturally focused on hospitals and emergency care facilities. Reports on the unique difficulties faced by locum GPs were far less common.

A popular career trajectory for newly qualified doctors and older general practitioners alike, working as a locum GP can promote a higher degree of autonomy and a healthier work-life balance. Being a locum, however, can be extremely challenging, particularly during a pandemic. Uncertainty surrounding regular income, absence of employment benefits and lack of patient continuity, can make the role of a locum GP extremely stressful. For many, the pandemic only exacerbated these challenges.

Coping With Financial Uncertainty

As the COVID-19 crisis worsened, the NHS began to employ emergency strategies to manage increasing hospital admissions. Doctors, nurses and other healthcare professionals were redeployed, non-essential services were postponed, and annual leave was cancelled. These crucial provisions prevented the NHS from being overwhelmed, but caused much financial uncertainty for locum practitioners, including locum GPs.

Suddenly, there was a reduction in elective work, with rotas being combined. There were fewer rota gaps in secondary care and, crucially for locum GPs, unfilled sessions in primary care. With annual leave for many contracted practitioners cancelled or postponed, fewer GP practices needed locum staff members. A 2020 survey suggested that almost 70% of GPs would offer less locum work over the subsequent few months than before the pandemic. In May, it was reported that some locum GPs had been forced to claim benefits after struggling to find work.

The financial uncertainty experienced by locum GPs was exacerbated by the fact that many of them were recently qualified, and consequently had little financial resilience. As unsalaried employees, locum workers are not entitled to employment benefits, only meagre statutory sick pay, meaning that for some, mandatory self-isolation after testing positive for COVID-19 was devastating.
Risking Personal Health to Practice Medicine

Research conducted by the Health Foundation indicates that at least 8% of GPs were at high risk of COVID-19. In March 2020, as the country went into lockdown, GP practices shifted to offering appointments online. NHS England were insistent, however, that GP practices continue to offer face to face consultations where clinically necessary. A career as a locum is particularly popular with newly qualified doctors and the older demographic. Many longer serving GPs wishing to reduce their workload decide to practice as locums, as an unsalaried role offers increased flexibility and shorter hours. In 2017, **25% of doctors 70 or over were locum.** Many locums are from overseas. Both demographics are at higher risk of complications associated with contracting COVID-19.

As unsalaried employees, locum GPs often have no access to sick pay. Many of those in high risk groups were unable to shield, as the potential loss in financial earnings was too great. Some locum doctors sought lower risk positions, such as remote triage and administration, but such positions were often difficult to find. Locum GPs, therefore, like other key workers across the globe, were forced to risk their health on a daily basis.

Isolation and Exclusion - An Integral Part of Being a Locum?

A recent report from the Society of Occupational Medicine suggested that many doctors, both in the private sector and the NHS, are struggling with their mental health. Between 30-40% of doctors had experienced burnout and work related stress. The report indicated that GPs were more vulnerable to work related stress, anxiety and depression than the majority of specialised doctors. A 2021 survey by the BMA, meanwhile, demonstrated that the COVID-19 pandemic had contributed to a significant decline in mental health for many GPs, with nearly half reporting an increase in stress and a deterioration in general mental wellbeing.

According to the British Journal of General Practice, strong team support in general practice is a prerequisite for individual GP resilience. Locum GPs are often new to a practice, only remaining there for just a few weeks, days, or even a single shift. As such, many lack the opportunity to build a supportive network of colleagues. This, coupled with an absence of patient continuity, can result in feelings of isolation. Computing and administration systems vary depending on the Clinical Commissioning Group. Locum GPs must successfully transition between these, learning complex new skills quickly. For many, this stress was exacerbated by working remotely. Many within the locum profession felt abandoned by NHS leaders and support groups. There was a clause in the locum bank framework, for example, which would have enabled GP practices to cancel locum shifts without notice and without being charged a fee. Although NHS England later clarified this, many felt amendments were slow.

Being a Locum GP in a Post-pandemic World: A Sensible Career Trajectory?

Locum GPs face a great number of challenges, which were only exacerbated by the pandemic. For many practitioners, however, becoming a locum remains a worthwhile career trajectory. Practising as a locum offers increased flexibility, variety, and potentially a higher income.

For newly qualified medical practitioners, working as a locum can be particularly advantageous, as it provides many opportunities to network with other practitioners and experience different medical conditions. For older general practitioners, becoming a locum may be the perfect way to increase autonomy and independence while decreasing working commitment.

The COVID-19 pandemic presented unprecedented challenges to the NHS, and strategists and leaders did a fantastic job at preventing the service from being overwhelmed. In the future, however, a greater effort should be made to highlight the challenges faced by locum GPs and offer support when needed. Locum GPs are an integral part of our National Health Service and played an integral role in running the CCAS service. It is vital that it should be valued as such.

Conflict of Interest

None.