

Sampling specialties

Taster days for UK foundation doctors

Whether you are just starting medical school or you are preparing for life as a junior doctor, the changes in postgraduate training that followed the implementation of Modernising Medical Careers will have affected you. The current system means that although we are exposed to fewer specialties as junior doctors before we must choose a career path to follow, we are also expected to choose a career sooner than our predecessors had to. It is no longer acceptable or possible to spend lots of time as a senior house officer in different specialties before deciding on what to do long term. The streamlining of the job ladder is not a bad thing, but it does raise the question of how you make an informed choice about whether or not to enter a specialty without having worked in it first.

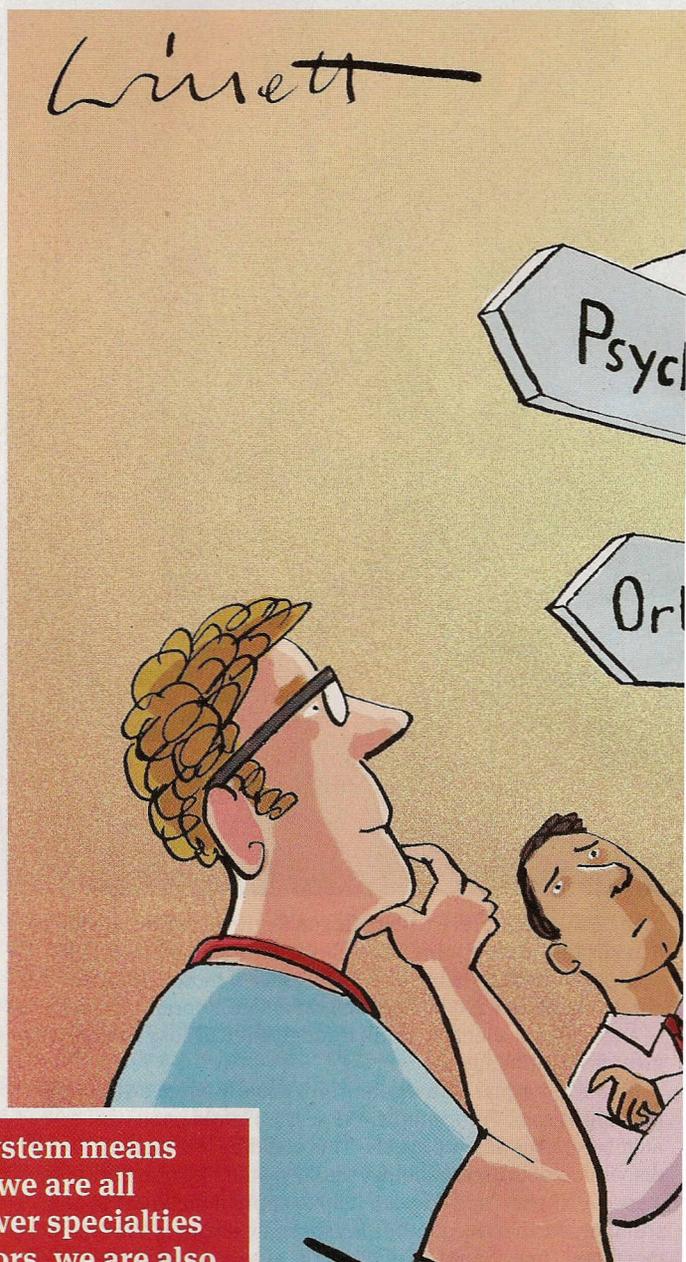
The UK Foundation Programme Office (www.foundationprogramme.nhs.uk), the body responsible for organising your foundation years, has introduced specialty taster days to meet this problem. Each trainee is entitled to 10 days (five a year) in any specialty, with the aim of increasing understanding of that specialty and encouraging us to think ahead when it comes to choosing core training posts.

Trainee's view

During my foundation year 1, it was simple to organise my five taster days in trauma and orthopaedics. I emailed my curriculum vitae and a covering letter to several orthopaedic departments close to my home town and received several responses, all of which were very positive and encouraging. The reply I received from Mrs McNally of Eastbourne Hospital was prompt, and it was clear from her response that she was very happy to have me, that she had plenty of knowledge and experience in the new training system I would eventually enter, and that she had lots of ideas for my time with her and the department. When selecting a supervisor, remember that the consultants most likely to reply are those who are most motivated to help young doctors and hence most likely to be good supervisors. I chose Eastbourne partly because of recommendations from colleagues at work, and partly because of proximity to my home. After I received this written acceptance, I applied to the foundation director and consultant educational supervisor at my hospital for the time away from work.

Where to go?

Deciding what specialty to spend my taster days in was probably the most difficult part of the whole process. I knew that I wanted to pursue a career in surgery, but I didn't know which specific area interested me most. I finally chose to do trauma and orthopaedics because it was an area I'd had some exposure to as a student and as a foundation year 1 doctor, but I had little knowledge of how the specialty worked day to day, and more importantly what it was like to be an orthopaedic surgeon. I also felt that as I was already working as a foundation year 1 in colorectal and general surgery it would be good to try something completely different. I decided against spending my taster days in my current deanery because I wanted to appreciate my taster time without



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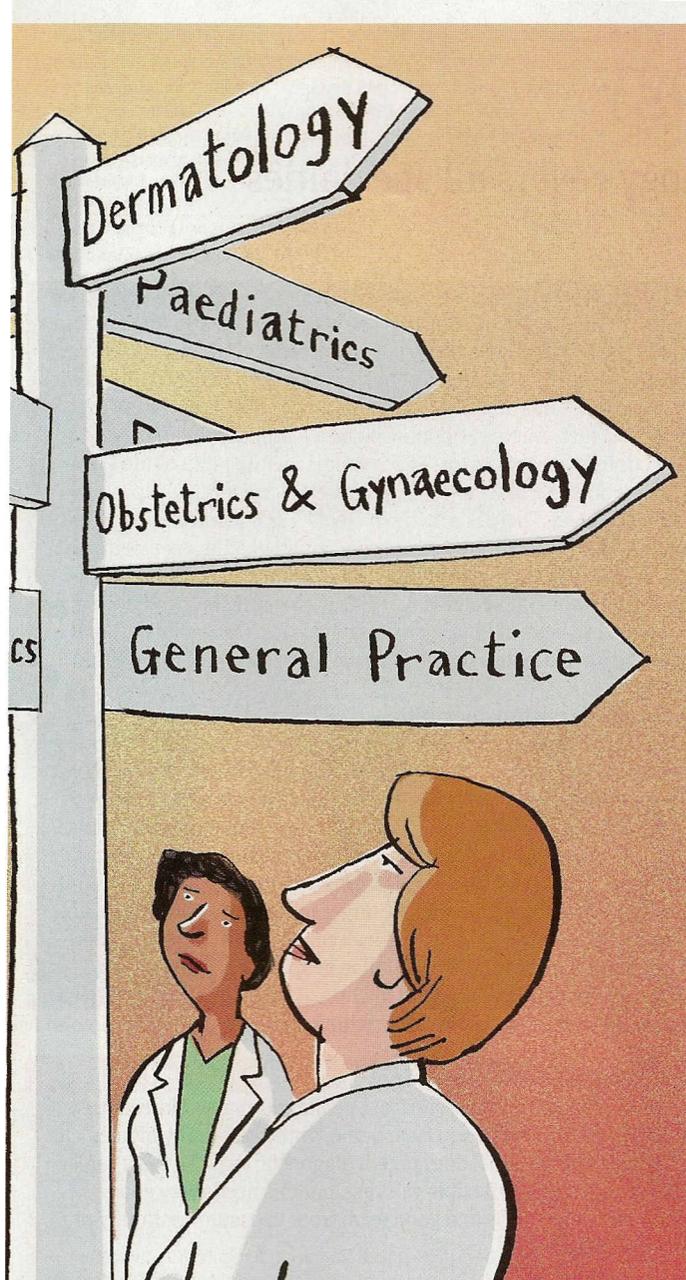
the reminders of my day to day work.

During my time at Eastbourne, I spent three days with my supervisor, attending

the daily 8 am trauma meetings; ward rounds; outpatient clinics; and operating lists. The final two days were spent with other consultants within the department, observing in clinics and assisting in theatre.

From my five taster days I gained real insight into what daily life was like in orthopaedic surgery. It was really important to see what it would be like to be a specialist trainee, as well as what it would be like to be a consultant. I was able to talk to the trainees about career plans and experience, about things they loved and things they found difficult.

Many experiences stayed with me from my time in the orthopaedic department. The emphasis placed on discussing risk with the patient surprised me. Any operation can go wrong, and the patient needs to understand what is possible and expected. There was also fantastic camaraderie within the whole team; many physiotherapists, booking clerks, and other staff members had worked together for years. They were essential in making the surgery productive. I was also able to talk to my consultant supervisor about tips that would help in the application process (box 1) and discuss careers advice in general. This has also given



Box 1: Top taster tips

- Organise taster days early in your foundation year 1 or 2 to maximise your chance of getting your preferred choice. Departments such as medicine, surgery, and anaesthetics are very busy, and you may have to wait a few weeks for an answer. Most deaneries ask for a minimum of six weeks' notice after you have received a written acceptance from the department you hope to go to.
- Local restrictions as to when trainees can take their taster days do exist—check with your deanery as soon as possible to avoid disappointment. Often, foundation year 1 doctors are allowed to take theirs in the latter part of the academic year, and foundation year 2 doctors are allocated time early on in the year (in time for applications).
- Ask your clinical or educational supervisors where they would recommend applying and who they feel would be a good potential consultant to contact.
- Deaneries will prefer you to stay locally, but officially you can apply anywhere in the country—the world is your oyster.
- You can apply to split your five days between more than one specialty.
- Taster days don't affect the amount of allocated leave quota you are entitled to as a trainee, such as annual leave or study leave, but if in doubt check with your deanery.
- Always ensure you have a comprehensive plan for your taster days especially if you are planning to spend your time away from your own deanery.

Box 2: Topics we discussed that I never get round to talking to my trainees about

- Work-life balance
- How the specialty will change over the next 30 years
- Tips on working with a team—for example, the nurses and ward clerks who are there longer than each of the trainees
- How to deal with unsatisfactory situations and co-workers
- How to change direction in your career
- All the other things you can do (examining, teaching, management).

Box 3: Other topics discussed during the taster week and by email afterwards

- Good courses to go on
- What things would enhance your curriculum vitae for a post in this specialty
- How to learn in the specialty
- How to approach future interviews
- Ideas for doing audits that may be published.

me a mentor in the branch of surgery I am most interested in.

I think that specialty taster days are a great way to see the world of your potential future specialty through the eyes of those who live it every day, and they give you much needed time to think carefully about which branch of medicine is best for you. I wholeheartedly recommend them to all foundation trainees.

The consultant's view

I was very flattered to have a foundation doctor who wanted to work in my specialty for a week. I felt rejuvenated by the end of it—probably the result of verbalising concepts I never get time for with my trainees. It is very liberating having an extra trained doctor, who is removed from the hassle of keeping the wards organised. I found it stimulating having someone around who asks sensible questions about how the specialty works and how it will develop over the next 30 years (box 2).

Medicine has never really been an apprenticeship. The current paradigm of medical education in hospitals has students observing for years followed by a plunge into the world of work, leaving them grateful to pick up pearls of wisdom along the way. The taster week allows a sense of separating the learning from the work.

It is interesting how quickly you can get into a different mind-set. I

treated Pete differently from my normal trainees, partly because I was not expecting work out of him. In reality, few of us see beyond the label, but without the bleeps and expectations, it was possible to realise that this doctor could easily be our registrar in three years, and he needed to be encouraged and supported.

I know it is useful for me to learn what the trainees find interesting. I am happy to be a sounding board in the future—we are already swapping ideas by email on presentations (box 3), courses, and things that will be useful on the curriculum vitae. I guess this is like mentoring, but many trainees do not get the chance to have this relationship with an interested senior colleague. The week also made me more appreciative of my own trainees and encouraged me to see everything as a learning opportunity.

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