

Policies and strategies to retain and support the return of experienced GPs in direct patient care: the ReGROUP mixed-methods study

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Plain English summary

The ReGROUP mixed-methods study

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Plain English summary

The UK faces a serious shortage of general practitioners (GPs). The general population is ageing and has more and more complex health needs. GP shortages are likely to put patients at risk, and the NHS urgently needs to understand why GPs leave patient care. Plans to maintain the GP workforce are under way but lack strong research evidence. As GP training takes at least 10 years, recruiting more GPs is not sufficient; retaining existing GPs is essential.

The aim was to explore why GPs leave general practice and to develop policies and strategies to maintain the workforce. Six activities were carried out. First, existing research on GPs' career decisions was reviewed: four factors have a major role (workload, job dissatisfaction, work-related stress and work-life balance). Second, 3370 GPs in south-west England were surveyed to estimate how many may leave within 5 years, finding a high likelihood of leaving and low GP morale. Third, 41 GPs of those who returned the survey, and people with a specific interest in the subject, were interviewed, seeking to understand GPs' experiences. This highlighted three themes: professional identity and value of the GP role, fear and risk, and available career choices. These studies allowed the development of policies and strategies to retain the GP workforce. Fourth, a panel of experts reviewed the policies and strategies, judging those relating to supporting day-to-day running of practices and reducing work-related stress to be both appropriate and feasible. Fifth, computer models were developed to identify practices at risk of losing their GPs within 5 years and thus potentially in need of support. Finally, interested parties were asked to consider the feasibility of introducing the draft policies. Participants suggested a range of actions for policy-makers, which included the need to explore 'portfolio' roles for GPs, and the possibility of providing formal career training for key members of the primary care team, such as practice managers.

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