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# PUBLIC HEALTH CAREERS: MAPPING INFORMATION, INFORMING PRACTITIONER NEEDS



**VANESSA DODD, CHARLENE BINDING AND SIOBHAN NEARY DESCRIBE THEIR RECENT RESEARCH**

**P**ublic health promotion and ill health prevention is a key priority for the NHS (NHS England, 2014). The public health workforce is a key element of achieving improved health outcomes for a diverse and changing population. Health Education England (2014) has identified some challenges for public health which include serving an ageing population with complex conditions as well as serving a population who are better informed about their health.

## What is the public health sector?

The public health sector includes a wide range of professions to help monitor and respond to the priorities. In the UK it is estimated that there are currently between 36,000 to 41,000 ‘core’ public health professionals with the four largest public health professions being health visitors, school nurses, public health practitioners and environmental health professionals (Centre for Workforce Intelligence (CfWI), 2014). A further 15-20 million staff in approximately 185 working occupations make up the ‘wider’ public health workforce (RSPH, 2015).

One task of the public health workforce is to raise its profile with the public. The visibility of public health roles in an individual’s daily life informs perceptions about career opportunities in the public health sector. For example, an epidemiologist that studies determinants of health or disease may work at a desk, in a lab or out in communities gathering data for research. Public health professionals like these may mainly work away from the public eye, but other jobs such as school and community nurses interact widely with the community.

Health Education East Midlands was interested in understanding the ways in which people access public health career information. Two notable routes are via career practitioners and online resources. The International Centre for Guidance Studies (iCeGS) designed a mixed-methods study to explore career practitioners’ views on the public health sector as well as the accessibility of public health career information on selected websites.

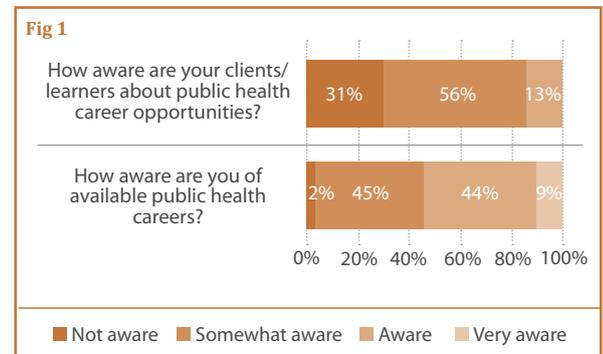
## Public Health sector and career advice

Career practitioners were invited to participate in a survey about the confidence in giving advice on public health careers. In addition questions were asked about

the level of interest in public health careers from clients and learners.

One hundred and one career practitioners took part in the survey. Respondents held a variety of roles including career advisers, management positions, career coaches, CEIAG coordinator and intensive personal adviser. Practitioners worked for a variety of organisations including education providers, schools, the local authority, the NCS as well as private sector companies. Only 9% of respondents were very aware of public health career opportunities (see figure 1). Almost half (45%) of career practitioners surveyed were only somewhat confident in providing public health career information. Career practitioners suggested there was limited information available about potential public health opportunities and most information used to inform practice was from online resources. In addition, approximately one-third (31%) of career practitioners reported that clients/learners were not likely to be aware of public health opportunities at all. Fourteen percent (14%) of practitioners have never been asked for information on public health opportunities.

## Awareness among practitioners and clients/learners about public health career opportunities.



Career practitioners were asked to list the top three public health careers discussed with their clients. The three most mentioned were: nursing (including school and community), GPs/medicine and midwifery. It has been acknowledged that the nursing and midwifery workforce have an important role in prevention and public health (Hatchard, 2015; Public Health England, 2013). However GPs have public health only as a tertiary

responsibility and as a result would not be classified as having a 'core' public health role (CfFWi, 2014). This may be due to the fact that many clients and learners see public health careers as indistinct from the broader healthcare sector. As one respondent suggested, there is a "lack of clear information e.g. public health search on NHS Careers website does not give clear results [and a] lack of visibility of [public health] practitioners..."

#### Public Health sector and internet resources

Nine websites were explored to understand approaches to presenting public health career information. The websites included a mix of generic career websites and public health specific websites. All websites were regularly updated. However, many did not have clear pathways from the main pages to public health related career information. In addition, public health specific websites were more likely to use lengthy text to deliver information about public health careers rather than using interactive tools. Public health specific websites were also less likely to discuss career management and employability skills.

#### Online opportunities for the public health sector

There are many opportunities for the public health sector to raise its profile. Career practitioners noted that a challenge for the public health sector is demystifying career pathways and making their resources 'young people friendly.'

As part of its 14/15 business plan, Health Education England has been working with partners to develop a new 'health careers' website. Launched in October 2015, this has brought together content from three previous national careers websites (PHORCaST, NHS Careers and Medical Careers) into a single site.

The new site (reviewed in this edition of *Career Matters*) provides information on over 350 roles in health, including specific sections for public health careers, real-life stories and videos plus a course finder tool listing over 1,000 courses leading to a career in health.

Other features include:

- a personalised homepage
- a 'compare roles' tool to compare information on up to three different roles,
- a 'related roles' function to explore roles similar to those of interest, but may not have considered before, and
- an events calendar for career related events across the country.

Visitors can access the site at [www.healthcareers.nhs.uk](http://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk) and there is a review in this edition of *Career Matters*.

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