



Hospital Doctor Retention and Motivation Project (HDRM) Research Brief 5 (March 2021): COVID-19 and doctor emigration

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COVID HDRM Interviews

This research brief draws on qualitative interviews undertaken in June/July 2020 with 31 hospital doctors in Ireland who had worked through the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in Ireland. Of the 31 doctors interviewed, 12 had returned to work in Ireland in the early stages of the pandemic (COVID Returners) and a further 19 discussed emigration during their interviews, including those whose emigration plans for 2020 had been disrupted due to COVID-19 (COVID Would-be Emigrants). Researchers used Twitter to contact potential respondents and conducted interviews remotely (by Zoom or telephone). Of the 31 Doctors interviewed, 8 were male and 23 female; 9 were consultants and 22 were NCHDs. This research brief summarises findings from a paper about COVID-19 and doctor emigration.

[Read Full Paper Here: Humphries, N, Byrne, J-P, Creese, J and Connell, J \(2021\) COVID-19 and Doctor Emigration: The Case of Ireland. BMC Human Resources for Health 19\(29\). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12960-021-00573-4>](#)

Doctor Emigration from Ireland

Ireland has a long history of doctor emigration, traditionally for advanced specialist training and career progression. Before the pandemic, the 2008 recession triggered a wave of doctor emigration from Ireland. The availability of better working conditions in several key destination countries (including Australia) was a significant driver of this emigration. Doctors are emigrating to escape the challenges they encountered in the Irish health system, either in terms of poor working conditions, poor work life balance, or uncertain career progression.

COVID-19 and Doctor Emigration

The initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, in early 2020, was accompanied by international travel restrictions and border closures which temporarily halted the free movement of people. Although COVID-19 interrupted international travel, we sought to ascertain how the pandemic might disrupt patterns of doctor emigration from Ireland. We found that the pandemic altered doctor emigration patterns in two ways – prompting return migration (COVID Returners) and disrupting the emigration plans of others (COVID Would-be Emigrants).

COVID Would-be Emigrants: Doctors considering emigration, including those who had experienced disruptions to their emigration plans due to COVID-19 travel restrictions and border closures in early 2020.

COVID Returners: Irish-trained emigrant doctors who returned to Ireland in March/April 2020, just as global travel ground to a halt due to COVID-19.

Drawing on data from the Irish Medical Council, the authors estimate that 260 COVID-Returners returned to Ireland in the early days of the pandemic. Their return generated significant media attention as a ‘good news’ story. Our interviews with 12 of these ‘COVID Returners’ found that their motivations for return were varied, but included:

- A desire to return to Ireland because global travel restrictions were about to be imposed. This was particularly the case for those who were due to begin postgraduate training in July 2020.
- A desire to be closer to family and friends during the pandemic.
- Returning in response to the government’s ‘Be on call for Ireland’ campaign, which called on health-workers not already working in the Irish health system to contribute to the pandemic response.

The other set of doctors impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic were those whose travel plans were disrupted by the COVID-related travel restrictions and border closures. This group of doctors, the COVID Would be Emigrants (N=21), included those whose plans for 2020 had included an international fellowship, or working abroad. Although their emigration plans were disrupted by COVID-19, these respondents remained determined to emigrate from Ireland as soon as possible.

Selected Quotes about Doctor Emigration from Ireland

COVID Returners

'there's a certain worry about family members back home. And if I had to be anywhere in the world, I kind of wanted to be in Ireland' (R31/COVID Returner).

'We left in such a hurry. We had a great life set up there and we literally had to try and . . . sell our furniture within a week, get back to Ireland, quarantine for two weeks, not see anyone and then start in hospitals with people we didn't know' (R35/COVID Returner).

'I want to stay, and I would stay. But I need to stay in a situation where it's equitable for me and my partner. I need to stay in a situation where I have some sort of job security' (R20/COVID Returner).

'COVID definitely . . . made the non-medical reasons for moving home more obvious and more important. I mean, we moved home because we wanted to be close to friends and family. If anything were to happen to any of our loved ones, we didn't want to be on the other side of the world' (R48/COVID Returner).

COVID Would-be Emigrants

'I need a time away from this system because it will destroy me if I stay' (R13/COVID Would be Emigrant)

'I don't have permanent employment in Ireland . . . so I have to emigrate. I have no current offer of a permanent job and if I stay . . . [and] . . . just continue to locum that would be kind of a slight against my career. . . So there's really no option for me but to leave' (R21/COVID Would be Emigrant).

'The terms and conditions here are just so much less good than in other places. So you have to really want to be in Ireland to be back here now. But then during COVID, maybe it's a good thing to be in Ireland. Maybe that will have, that bit about being at home is psychologically important to people' (R26/COVID Would be Emigrant).

'Once I finish my training, it's not a question that I would like to go abroad for further training. If I don't do that, I'll be on the dole. I can't stay working as a Reg [Registrar] after I finish' (R6/COVID Would be Emigrant).

Conclusions

- This paper illustrates how the pandemic has **intensified and reinforced** rather than radically altered the dynamics of doctor emigration from Ireland.
- Among COVID Returners, many had brought forward pre-existing plans to return to Ireland in 2020. Those who returned without pre-existing plans **will not remain** without access to secure jobs and training (i.e. beyond their initial short-term 'COVID' contracts).
- Although Ireland trains enough doctors to meet demand, minimal effort is made to retain them. A combination of a culture of **medical migration**, **weak workforce planning** and **poor working conditions** continue to drive doctor emigration from Ireland.
- The pandemic will likely **increase global competition** for doctors. A continuation of the pre-pandemic pattern of largescale doctor emigration from Ireland could pose a threat to the Irish health system.

About the HDRM Project

The Hospital Doctor Retention and Motivation project (HDRM) is a research project led by Dr Niamh Humphries. It is funded by the Health Research Board (HRB) (2018-2022) and based in RCPI. Using qualitative and quantitative research methods, the HDRM project seeks to generate information to inform policy and improve doctor retention in the Irish health system. Further information and all publications from the project can be found here: <https://www.rcpi.ie/hdrm/>

