Careers in community sexual and reproductive health

Community sexual and reproductive health (CSRH) is a new medical specialty that was approved by the General Medical Council in 2010. CSRH evolved from the obstetrics and gynaecology subspecialty of sexual and reproductive health. It was set up in an effort to improve leadership and skills in community based services and to reduce health inequalities.

Training in CSRH is via a run-through programme lasting six years. The programme prepares its specialist trainees to become consultants who lead a wide range of sexual and reproductive health services within a fully integrated sexual health centre. The box shows the clinical modules covered in the CSRH curriculum. Only a few UK sexual health centres deliver care in all of these clinical areas under one roof. However, owing to increasing political pressure to integrate sexual health services and to transfer outpatient gynaecological services from hospital into the community, future CSRH consultants will be required to apply a broad range of clinical skills in a community setting. Non-clinical modules of the CSRH curriculum cover important topics such as public health, leadership and management, teaching and ethics, and legal issues.

Why choose CSRH as a career?

A career in CSRH is not for doctors who thrive on adrenaline fuelled lifesaving interventions. Instead, CSRH would suit doctors who not only have technical expertise in office based procedures but also enjoy applying “soft skills” such as communicating well and without judgment. This could, for example, be by supporting a bewildered client to make an informed decision about an unplanned pregnancy or by teasing out the real reason behind sexual risk taking behaviour or a sexual dysfunction.

A career in CSRH would also suit doctors who thrive on providing holistic care to a wide range of clients. They need to be comfortable and patient enough to support vulnerable members of society and to hear their personal and sometimes painful stories. Having a positive attitude towards sexuality and the diversity of its expression, together with a sense of humour, are also essential to be able to enjoy CSRH work.

Furthermore, CSRH suits doctors who are interested in the wider aspects of health and the world beyond medicine. Human rights, health psychology, morals, ethics, religion, politics, economics, law, sociology, anthropology, and education all have an important impact on sexual health and the daily work of a CSRH specialist and are fascinating topics to learn more about.

What is it like working as a CSRH trainee?

Most CSRH trainees spend the first 18 months or so of their training in an obstetrics and gynaecology department where they are going to work. They are then likely to continue in a sexual and reproductive health centre, based either in the community or attached to a hospital, and in outreach clinics. During this time they should have sociable working hours without on-calls, but they may be required to do evening or Saturday clinics.

CSRH trainees are part of a multidisciplinary team and have regular contact with people from other agencies. These include nurses, sexual health advisers, gynaecology medicine colleagues, general practitioners, midwives, hospital gynaecologists, counsellors, public health specialists, psychosexual therapists, and social workers, as well as sexual assault referral centre and safeguarding teams, youth and voluntary sector workers, and representatives of client groups.

Fields to go into as a CSRH consultant

Changes have taken place recently in sexual and reproductive health commissioning, but community based services will continue to be delivered and are likely to expand. Job prospects for CSRH consultants are therefore generally good.

Leadership and management responsibilities are likely to take up a considerable part of a CSRH consultant’s time. CSRH consultants acquire a qualification in medical education during their training, and teaching of medical students, junior doctors, general practitioners, and community pharmacists can be an important part of their workload, as well as involvement in public health.

In addition to leading an integrated sexual health drop-in service, CSRH consultants may hold clinics in complex contraception, menopause or premenstrual syndrome, vulval disorders, and office based gynaecology. Specialised services for vulnerable people such as sex workers or those with learning disabilities might be held in non-traditional settings to increase accessiblity. Some CSRH consultants run abortion services, work in or run a sexual assault referral centre, or, with additional training, deliver psychosexual counselling.

Tips to get into CSRH specialty training

Approved CSRH training centres are spread across all local education and training boards in England, Scotland, and Wales. Most, if not all, future CSRH posts will be starting at specialty training year 1 level; the CSRH person specification is published on the Modernising Medical Careers website (www.mmc.nhs.uk/pdf/PS%202013%20ST%20CSRH.pdf). Ten doctors will join the current 19 specialist trainees this summer. England will advertise four posts via the national recruitment round for specialty training in November.

Showing genuine interest in the specialty by doing relevant clinical attachments, elective modules, or voluntary work or by becoming a foundation year doctor in sexual and reproductive health, genitourinary medicine, public health, or general practice will look good on your application. Being geographically flexible is also likely to be necessary. The CSRH trainees network can be contacted for tips on how to get into the specialty.

Many thanks to Kate Guthrie for her helpful suggestions.

Competing interests: None declared.

Heike Gleser, specialist trainee year 5 in community sexual and reproductive health, Conifer (City Health Care Partnership), Hull, UK heikegleser@nhs.net

Heike Gleser, specialist trainee year 5 in community sexual and reproductive health, Conifer (City Health Care Partnership), Hull, UK heikegleser@nhs.net