

**BMA**



# Doctors' titles: explained



British Medical Association  
bma.org.uk





## Background

The BMA (British Medical Association) is committed to supporting excellence in patient care. Part of this involves improving patient experience by helping patients to understand the roles, qualifications and training of the doctors who care for them. The BMA's PLG (patient liaison group) has prepared a resource for patients that explains the difference between different types of doctors that patients may encounter as well as clarifying some of the different designations (titles, grades or specialisms) which may be used to refer to doctors. A brief description of each role is given, together with an outline of training requirements and details of the relevant regulatory and professional bodies. This glossary has been developed in close consultation with all BMA committees.

This resource will be updated at regular intervals to maintain the latest information. If you are aware of any further information which may enhance this resource, please email: [info.plg@bma.org.uk](mailto:info.plg@bma.org.uk).

All medical doctors have to register with the GMC (general medical council) – the body responsible for regulation – in order to practice medicine in the UK. The GMC Medical Register gives basic information on the qualifications of every doctor. The GMC enquiry line is 0161 923 6602 or see [www.gmc-uk.org](http://www.gmc-uk.org)

**This resource is meant to provide general guidance only and should not be treated as a complete or authoritative statement.**

## [Link to contents](#)

### [Summary](#)

#### [Types of doctors](#)

[Medical students](#)

[Resident doctors](#)

[Senior doctors](#)

[Consultants](#)

[SAS doctors](#)

[General Practitioners](#)

### [Other common medical titles for doctors](#)

[Academic doctors](#)

[Locum doctors](#)

### [Doctors by specialty and the related Royal Colleges and Faculties](#)

## Summary

Doctors are responsible for leading the care of patients. They evaluate symptoms, consider possible diagnoses, undertake examinations and tests, advise patients on treatment options and monitor the progress of treatment. If necessary, they will refer patients onwards to a specialist doctor or other health professional for further opinion.

All doctors that work with patients in the UK must be registered with the GMC to undertake clinical practice. Since 2009, they are also required to have a medical licence to practice that gives a doctor the legal authority to undertake certain activities in the UK, for example prescribing medication and working in the NHS. Doctors are described by the *specialist area* that they practice in, for example cardiology, and by the level of training and experience they have, which is called their *grade*.

All medical doctors start as medical students and typically continue training until they become a consultant, GP (general practitioner) or SAS (staff grade, associate specialist and specialty) doctor. Although doctors are expected to keep up to date with advances in their specialty, through ongoing education called continuous professional development (CPD), there are three main steps to medical education: undergraduate medical education, the foundation programme, and specialty GP training.

Doctors are assessed and examined during their training, with the aim being professional registration and often, ultimately, the certificate of completion of training (CCT) or equivalent. Once a doctor receives this, it allows them entry onto the GMC's *specialist register* or *GP register* and to work independently without any senior supervision. Doctors from overseas can also gain entry to the GMC's register as well as specialist or GP registers providing they have the required qualifications, training and experience. All doctors practicing medicine in the UK are required to follow the GMC's good medical practice guidance<sup>1</sup> and be subject to the GMC fitness to practice<sup>2</sup> actions.

### Hello my name is...

The '[Hello, my name is...](http://hellomynameis.org)' campaign aims to encourage and remind all healthcare professionals across the UK to introduce themselves to the patients and visitors with whom they come into contact.<sup>3</sup>

We believe that it is good practice for doctors to explain what their role is in relation to your care, if they do not and you are unsure about their job title, we encourage you to ask them to explain.

This resource is meant to give patients some general information on the types of doctors they are most likely to come across when seeking medical attention.

## Types of doctors

The following is an overview of medical students and different types of doctors. Other than for medical students, all doctors listed in this section are all medically qualified and will usually use the title 'Dr' before their name. Doctors who perform surgery may, due to historical reasons, use the titles 'Mr', 'Mrs', 'Miss' or 'Ms' instead. A doctor that is a university professor may also use the title 'Professor' instead of 'Dr'.

### The title 'Dr'

It is important to be aware that the title 'Dr' is also used by dentists or people who have a PhD (doctor of philosophy) degree, although they may not be a *medically* qualified doctor.

1 For more information see: <http://www.gmc-uk.org/guidance/index.asp>

2 For more information, see: [http://www.gmc-uk.org/the\\_meaning\\_of\\_fitness\\_to\\_practise.pdf\\_25416562.pdf](http://www.gmc-uk.org/the_meaning_of_fitness_to_practise.pdf_25416562.pdf)

3 For more information, see: <http://hellomynameis.org.uk/>

## Medical students

Medical students typically undertake a five-year course of study for undergraduate or a four-year postgraduate course to become a doctor. This usually includes two years studying basic medical sciences, followed by three years of more clinical training during which they work in hospital wards under the supervision of consultants. Following completion of their medical degree, newly qualified doctors gain provisional registration with the medical regulator, the GMC, and receive their primary medical qualification, typically denoted in the UK by one of the following acronyms: MBBS, MBChB, BM, MB BCh.<sup>4</sup>

If the hospital or practice you attend is one where teaching takes place, you may see medical students accompanying qualified doctors, for example on ward rounds or in out-patient clinics. As a patient, you should be asked whether you mind a medical student being present during your consultation or treatment. If you do not feel comfortable having a medical student present, you should inform a member of staff.

## Resident doctors

Medical graduates enter the medical workforce as 'resident doctors' on a two year work based training programme. This is known as the 'foundation programme' and is the first level of clinical training for qualified doctors that bridges the gap between medical school and specialty training.

The foundation programme is carried out in hospitals and the two years are often referred to as 'FY1' (foundation year one) or 'FY2' (foundation year two) by medical staff, and as such, resident doctors on the foundation programme may introduce themselves to patients as an 'FY1' or 'FY2' doctor. Completion of FY1 allows resident doctors to gain full registration with the GMC and completion of FY2 allows them to apply for further study and training in a specialised area of medicine, for example cardiology (the medical treatment of heart disease), or general practice. There are more than 60 different specialties that doctors work within.

Specialty training for doctors can take up to eight years depending on the area, and during this time they are still considered 'resident doctors' and work under the supervision of a more senior doctor, usually a consultant. Doctors in specialty training are often referred to as specialty trainees (ST) or specialty registrars StR, and sometimes the year of training is included in this title, for example, 'ST4 psychiatry' would mean a resident doctor that is in their fourth year of specialty training in psychiatry.

A specialty registrar (StR) at times referred to as a registrar, is a resident doctor who has completed their foundation training but is still in training in a specialty area of medicine.

***"Hello, my name is Ellen, I am a Emergency Medicine trainee. I am a fully qualified doctor who is training to be a surgeon. I have at least 4 years training after university, probably more. I work under the supervision of a Consultant and assist them in theatre and perform operations. There may be times when I am the most senior doctor on a ward in my specialty, but I am still training, and will be for several years."***

Dr Ellen McCourt, resident doctor

4 MBBS – Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery, MBChB – Bachelor of Medicine/Bachelor of Surgery, BM – Bachelor of Medicine, MB BCh – Bachelor of Medicine and Bachelor of Surgery

**What are resident doctors?** Resident doctors are qualified doctors in clinical training.

**Where do patients see a resident doctor?** In a hospital or GP practice.

**What is their level of training?** They have completed a medical degree and foundation training, and have anywhere up to eight year's experience working as a hospital doctor, depending on their specialty, or up to three years in general practice. All resident doctors work under the supervisor of a senior doctor.

**Common titles for resident doctors:**

**FY1** – foundation year one resident doctor

**FY2** – foundation year two resident doctor

**ST** – specialty trainee in a hospital specialty

**SpR** – specialty registrar in a hospital specialty

**GPST** – specialty registrar in general practice

## Senior doctors

The terms 'resident' and 'senior' in the medical profession indicate whether or not a doctor is still in training and whether they can practice independently without supervision. Senior doctors can have many titles. The two most familiar are consultant and GP, but there are other senior doctor titles that are often grouped together, called SAS (staff grade, associate specialist and specialty) doctors.

Patients will often see their GP initially, and may be referred by their GP to a senior hospital doctor for further diagnosis or treatment. However, in some cases, like in the case of sexual health, a GP referral is not required and patients can make an appointment directly with a community sexual health doctor.

## Consultants

A consultant is a senior doctor who has overall responsibility for the care of patients in hospital. They have completed a minimum of six years training in their speciality area to gain a certificate of completion of training (CCT) and listing on the GMC's specialist register. Listing on the GMC's specialist register allows consultants to practice independently without any senior supervision, but they are required to pursue ongoing education in their specialty through a system called continuous professional development (CPD).

Most consultants work in hospitals in multidisciplinary teams which will include nurses and other healthcare professionals as well as other doctors. All consultants are listed on the GMC's specialist register for hospital and other specialists.

***"Hello my name is Paul. Consultants are the most senior grade of hospital doctors and are responsible for leading a team to deliver care for patients. Every patient who is admitted to hospital will have a named consultant who is responsible for their care. Consultants are specialists in a particular area of medicine, and after graduating from medical school, it takes a doctor between six and eight years (basic training followed by specialist training) to become a consultant."***

Dr Paul Flynn, consultant

**What are consultants?** Consultants are senior doctors that have completed full medical training in a specialised area of medicine and are listed on the GMC's specialist register. They have clinical responsibilities and administrative responsibilities in managing SAS and resident doctors.

**Where do patients see a consultant?** Usually in a hospital but sometimes in clinics run in the community.

**What is their level of training?** Completion of a specialty training programme (or experience assessed as equivalent) leading to entry to the GMC's specialist register, plus ongoing education through the CPD system.

## SAS doctors

SAS doctors are Staff Grade, Associate Specialist and Specialty Doctors. SAS doctors have at least four years postgraduate experience, two of which are in their chosen specialty. This means that doctors can move into these posts at various levels of experience and seniority, as well as gaining experience and promotion within the grade itself.

There are SAS doctors in every hospital specialty and also in community hospitals (such as psychiatry and paediatrics). Some hold jobs in both the hospital and the community (e.g. gynaecology and sexual health). Some SAS doctors also work part-time as GPs. SAS doctors therefore work across primary, community and hospital care.

Many SAS doctors have made a positive choice to step into a SAS position from a traditional consultant training pathway. This could be for reasons such as geographical stability and the chance to work regular hours in a chosen specialty and often provides a better work-life balance. There are routes, through gaining CESR (Certificate of Eligibility for Specialist Registration) or applying for a training post, for SAS doctors to become consultants if they want to, although many prefer a career as a SAS doctor.

*"Hello, my name is Anthea. I am a SAS doctor, which does not mean I am military! It means I am one of a group of doctors making up about 20% of the medical workforce, in grades collectively known as SAS grades, being made up of Specialty doctors, Associate specialists and Staff grades. We are all fully qualified senior doctors, who have then chosen to enter a specialty. We often work alongside both consultants and trainees. We undertake a lot of the patient contacts in hospital both for routine and emergency work, so you may well have been treated by a SAS doctor."*

Dr Anthea Mowat, associate specialist

## What are staff grade, associate specialist and speciality doctors?

SAS doctors are experienced and senior doctors in permanent posts. They have at least four years of full-time postgraduate training, two of which have been in their relevant specialty.

## Where do patients see staff grade, associate specialist and speciality doctors?

In a hospital. SAS doctors have a very 'hands on' role with a lot of patient contact.

**What is their level of training?** A SAS doctor has completed their undergraduate and foundation training, and has at least two further years of specialist training plus undergoes further education through the CPD system.

## General Practitioners

GPs have overall responsibility for the management of patient care outside of hospitals, including the diagnosis and treatment of health problems and the referral of patients for specialist treatment where necessary. Rather than having a specific specialist area, GPs can diagnose many illnesses or ailments, and determine whether a patient needs to see a doctor with more specialist training. They are also increasingly responsible for the management and monitoring of complex chronic illnesses.

GPs are fully trained and are allowed to practice independently without supervision, but as with consultants, they are required to pursue ongoing education during their careers in general medicine through the CPD system. All qualified GPs are listed on the GMC's GP register.

Some GP doctors have a GPwSI (GP with a special interest) accreditation, which supplements their role as a generalist to provide an extra area of specialist knowledge.

*"As your GP, I am your first port of call and can help you with all general health matters, from your physical health to your mental wellbeing. I have had formal training in general practice, since graduating from University, and am a specialist in family medicine. Depending on your special requirements, I may manage your illness until you are better, or I may refer you to a hospital specialist."*

Dr Krishna Kasaraneni, GP partner

**What are general practitioners?** GPs are senior doctors that have completed full training in general medicine. They can practice independently without supervision, and will supervise GPs in training.

**Where do patients see general practitioners?** In a GP practice or health centre.

**What is their level of training?** They have completed a three year GP training programme (or assessed as equivalent) leading to entry to the GMC's GP register, plus ongoing education through the CPD system.



## Other common medical titles for doctors

### Academic doctors

Academic or clinical academic doctors often work in a combination of teaching, research, and specialist clinical care. They undertake research in order to develop the science of medicine and can be any grade of doctor from a foundation year resident doctor to a consultant, GP or SAS doctor. Common job titles for academic doctors are: academic clinical fellow, clinical lecturer, clinical research fellow, senior clinical lecturer, reader or professor – in order of seniority. Academics who are professors, readers or senior lecturers will normally have a clinical contract at a hospital or be a GP. A doctor in a post such as clinical lecturer will also normally occupy a training grade post such as specialty registrar or GP registrar.

#### Common academic job titles (in order of seniority)

**ACF** – academic clinical fellow

**CL** – clinical lecturer

**CRF** – clinical research fellow

**CSL** – senior clinical lecturer

Reader/Associate professor

**Prof** – professor

### Locum doctors

A locum doctor is a fully qualified doctor who is temporarily covering a position, for example, if a doctor is on sick leave or there is large workload in a GP surgery or hospital ward that requires the support of a temporary doctor. All doctors, other than a foundation year one doctors, can work as locum doctors. Locum doctors can therefore be foundation year two resident doctors, resident doctors in speciality training, SAS doctors, GPs or consultants working in hospital. All locum doctors are fully-registered with, and regulated by, the GMC.

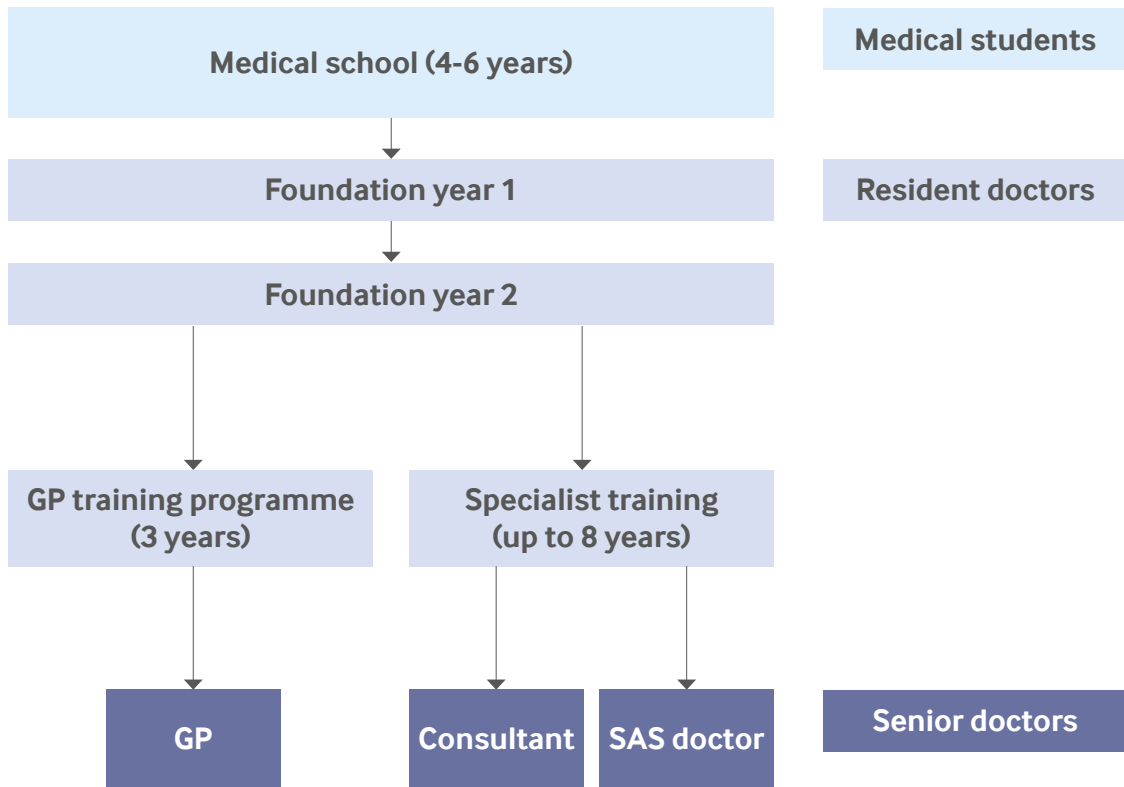
*“My name is Mary, I am currently working as a GP Locum which means I step in to GP practices to help out when they need an extra pair of GP hands. I am a fully qualified GP and do everything your normal GP would do in your GP surgery including consultations, prescribing, referrals, chronic disease management, minor surgery, house visits, and supervising students and GP Trainees”*

Mary O’Brien, locum GP

*“Hello, I am Tom. I’m a locum consultant in radiology. Having worked for many years as a full-time consultant, I took partial retirement this year, and now work as a locum in two hospitals. As a locum, I can provide help when the department is short staffed, for example if someone is on holiday, or if there is a backlog of scans to report, to prevent patients waiting for the results of their scans or X-rays..”*

Tom Kane, locum consultant

Figure 1 – Journey through medical training.



## Doctors by specialty and the related Royal Colleges and Faculties

The medical royal colleges and faculties are the professional bodies for doctors in a certain specialty or specialty area and are regulated by the GMC. They design the curricula that doctors undertake during specialty training and conduct examinations which doctors must pass if they are to progress to a consultant or GP post. A doctor will undertake an assessment to become a member of a royal college, following which they may indicate their membership by using certain letters after their name, for example a member of the RCOG (Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists) would have the letters MRCOG after their name. Fellowships within a medical royal college are awarded to members as a mark of distinction and recognition of outstanding contribution to the college's specialty. A fellow is, therefore, the highest position of membership that a doctor can reach within a medical royal college.

Below is a list of common medical specialties, the Royal College affiliated with these specialties and the letters that doctors may use after their name if they are a member or fellow of a college. There is also information listed about what doctors working in these specialties do and where patient information about different medical specialties is available from.

### Anaesthetist

Provide anaesthetics (drugs which cause loss of sensation) to patients before, during and after surgery and treat chronic pain.

#### Royal College of Anaesthetists

MRCoA/FRCoA (Member/Fellow of the Royal College of Anaesthetists)

RCoA patient information

[www.rcoa.ac.uk](http://www.rcoa.ac.uk)

### Emergency medicine doctor – A&E

Assess, treat, admit, or discharge patients that seek urgent medical attention at any time of day or night. This is a generalist hospital role that specialises in resuscitation.

#### The Royal College of Emergency Medicine

MRCEM/FRCCEM (Member/Fellow of the Royal College of Emergency Medicine)

CEM patient information

[www.rcem.ac.uk](http://www.rcem.ac.uk)

### Forensic physician

The role of a forensic physician is varied – from providing medical care and assessing detainees/suspects in police custody to attending scenes of death and (if these occur in suspicious circumstances) provide interpretation of their findings to the police and courts. For further information on the role and training of a forensic physician please visit the [FFLM webpages](#).

#### Faculty of Forensic and Legal Medicine

FFLM is recognised as the standards' setting body for forensic medicine: General Forensic Medicine and Sexual Offence Medicine.

LFFLM/FFFLM/MFFLM (Licentiate/Fellow/Member of the Faculty of Forensic and Legal Medicine)

<http://fflm.ac.uk/>

### General practitioner

A GP is a specialist in general medicine, rather than one particular area.

#### Royal College of General Practitioners

MRCGP/FRCGP (Member/Fellow of the Royal College of General Practitioners)

RCGP patient information

[www.rcgp.org.uk](http://www.rcgp.org.uk)

## Gynaecologist

Specialist in the care of the female reproductive system (the vagina, uterus and ovaries) and the breasts.

### Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists

MRCOG/FRCOG (Member/Fellow Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists)

RCOG patient information

[www.rcog.org.uk](http://www.rcog.org.uk)

## Obstetrician

Specialists in pregnancy, childbirth and the immediately after birth period (including care of the new-born).

### Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists

MRCOG/FRCOG (Member/Fellow Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists)

RCOG patient information

[www.rcog.org.uk](http://www.rcog.org.uk)

## Occupational physician

Diagnosis, management and prevention of disease due to, or made worse by, workplace factors.

For further information about the training and qualifications of occupational physicians please see the following BMA guidance:

<https://www.bma.org.uk/advice/employment/occupational-health/the-occupational-physician>

### Faculty of Occupational Medicine

MFOM/ FFOM (Member/Fellow of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine)

[www.fom.ac.uk](http://www.fom.ac.uk)

## Ophthalmologist

The medical and surgical medical and surgical care of the eyes and visual system and in the prevention of eye disease and injury.

### Royal College of Ophthalmologists

MRCOphth/FRCOphth (Member/Fellow of the Royal College of Ophthalmologists)

RCOphth patient information

[www.rcophth.ac.uk](http://www.rcophth.ac.uk)

## Paediatrician

Specialists in the medical management of conditions affecting babies, children and young people.

### Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health

MRCPCH/FRCPCH (Member/Fellow of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health)

[www.rcpch.ac.uk](http://www.rcpch.ac.uk)

## Physician

A physician is a general term for someone who practices medicine, they will usually have a specialist area.

### Royal College of Physicians

MRCP(UK)/FRCP(UK) (Member/Fellow of the Royal Colleges of Physicians of the United Kingdom)

[www.rcplondon.ac.uk](http://www.rcplondon.ac.uk)

### Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow

MRCPSG/FRCPSG (Member/Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow)

[www.rcpsg.ac.uk](http://www.rcpsg.ac.uk)

### **Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh**

MRCPE/FRCPE (Member/Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh)

[www.rcpe.ac.uk](http://www.rcpe.ac.uk)

Physicians include, for example:

- Cardiologists – heart disease
- Dermatologists – skin disease
- Endocrinologists – diseases related to hormones, this is a sub-specialty
- Gastroenterologists – diseases of the intestines, liver and biliary tract and pancreas
- Geriatricians – illnesses of older people
- Haematologists – disorders of the blood and bone marrow
- Neurologists – diagnosis, treatment and care of patients with disorders of the nervous system
- Oncologists – treatment of cancer
- Renal physicians – treatment of all forms of kidney disease
- Respiratory physicians – treatment of organs of the body that help you to breathe
- Rheumatologists – treatment of conditions affecting joints, bones, soft tissues and muscles.

### **Psychiatrist**

Specialists in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mental disorders.

### **Royal College of Psychiatrists**

MRCPsych/FRCPsych (Member/Fellow of the Royal College of Psychiatrists)

RCPsych patient information

[www.rcpsych.ac.uk](http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk)

### **Radiologist**

Specialist in the medical use of imaging to diagnose and treat disease seen within the body.

### **Royal College of Radiologists**

MRCR/FRCR (Member/Fellow of the Royal College of Radiologists)

[www.rcr.ac.uk](http://www.rcr.ac.uk)

### **Sport and exercise medicine**

Management of medical conditions and injury in those who participate in physical activity.

### **Faculty of Sport and Exercise Medicine**

MFSEM/FFSEM (Member/Fellow of the Faculty of Sport and Exercise Medicine)

[www.fsem.ac.uk](http://www.fsem.ac.uk)

### **Surgeon**

A specialist in surgery, which is a broad category of invasive medical treatment that involves operating on the body.

### **Royal College of Surgeons of England**

MRCSEng/FRCSEng (Member/Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of England)

RCSEng patient information

[www.rcseng.ac.uk](http://www.rcseng.ac.uk)

### **Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow**

MRCPSG/FRCPSG (Member/Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons of Glasgow)

[www.rcpsg.ac.uk](http://www.rcpsg.ac.uk)

### **Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh**

MRCSEd/FRCSEd (Member/fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh)

[www.rcsed.ac.uk](http://www.rcsed.ac.uk)

### **Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland**

MRSCI/FRCISI (Member/Fellow of the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland)

[www.rcsi.ie](http://www.rcsi.ie)

Surgeons include:

- Cardiothoracic surgeons – diagnosis and management of surgical conditions of the heart, lungs and oesophagus
- General surgeons – consultant general surgeons usually specialise in one of the following sub-specialties: vascular, endocrine, oncology and gastrointestinal
- Neurosurgeons – surgical treatment of diseases that affect the nervous system
- Oral and maxillofacial surgeons – surgical treatment of conditions affecting the mouth, jaws, face and neck
- Otolaryngologists – surgical treatment of conditions dealing with the ear, nose and throat
- Paediatric surgeons – surgical treatment for conditions affecting fetuses, infants, children, adolescents and young adults
- Plastic surgeons – reconstructive and reparative surgery
- Orthopaedic surgeons – surgical treatment of injuries and diseases of the musculoskeletal system, which comprises of the bones, joints, ligaments, tendons, muscles and nerves
- Urologists – surgical and medical treatment for diseases of the kidneys, ureters, bladder, prostate and male genitalia.
- Vascular – surgical treatment of conditions affecting the circulation, including diseases of arteries, veins and lymphatics.

The NHS Careers website also has information on the different kinds of medical specialists, which you can find here: <http://www.nhscareers.nhs.uk/>.



**British Medical Association**

BMA House, Tavistock Square, London WC1H 9JP  
[bma.org.uk](http://bma.org.uk)

© British Medical Association, 2017

BMA 20170424