

Two in five GPs to 'quit within five years'

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Around two in every five GPs in the South West have said they intend to quit within the next five years, exposing the magnitude of the region's impending healthcare crisis suggesting that the picture for the UK may be particularly challenging.

The University of Exeter's recent largescale survey of GPs across the region also found that seven out of ten GPs intend to change their working patterns in a way that would mean less contact with patients. This included leaving patient care, taking a career break, or reducing their hours.

More than 2,000 GPs responded to the survey, in research which involved collaboration with Bristol University. It was funded by the National Institute for Health Research and published today in *BMJ Open*. The data provides a snapshot of low morale which, if echoed in other regions, could point to a deeper and more imminent crisis than previously anticipated in relation to the worsening shortage of GPs nationwide.

Professor John Campbell, of the University of Exeter Medical School, who led the research, has called for a move away from "sticking plaster solutions" towards robust, joined-up action to avert the crisis nationwide.

Professor Campbell, a practising GP, said: "We carried out this survey because of a nationally recognised crisis in the shortage of GPs across the country, and our findings show an even bleaker outlook than expected for GP cover, even in an area which is often considered

desirable, and which has many rural communities. If GPs have similar intentions to leave or reduce their hours in other regions, as many are reporting, the country needs to take robust action more swiftly and urgently than previously thought."

Over the past four years, a crisis has been developing around the national GP workforce. The number of unfilled GP posts quadrupled between 2012 and 2014, while the numbers of GPs fell substantially. The national situation has prompted political action, with the Government announcing measures to train 5,000 new GPs in 2015, and to increase the proportion of medical students who choose general practice as a career.

In response, and to get a true picture of the scale of the problem in the region, the research team sent surveys to 3,370 GPs across the South West, and received responses from 2,248. The study found that more than half of GPs (54%) reported low morale. This group was particularly likely to indicate that they intended to leave the profession. The researchers conclude that the findings highlight the magnitude of the potential GP shortage crisis that is imminently facing the region, and reflect the current state of general practice in the UK.

Professor John Campbell, of the University of Exeter Medical School, who led the research and who is a practising GP, said: "We know that there's an ageing workforce in [general practice](#), with 30 per cent of GPs being over 50 years old. Previous research has found that GP morale is low because of workload pressures, and many younger GPs do not want the financial risk and responsibilities of taking on a practice. Yet if the GPs we surveyed fulfil their intentions to leave or to cut back their patient contact, and no action is taken to address the issue, the South West will experience a severe shortfall of GPs in the next five years."

Professor Campbell said: "Whilst numerous government-led initiatives are underway to address recruitment, there is a need to address the

underlying serious malaise which is behind this data. We are in a perilous situation in England, with poor morale of the current GP workforce, and major difficulties with recruitment and retention of GPs reflected in the stark overall reduction in the GP workforce. Reactive, sticking-plaster approaches are not the answer.

"GPs and their teams deliver nine out of every ten patient contacts with the NHS but attract just seven pence in every pound of NHS resource; that is unsustainable. The government needs to work with the Royal College of General Practitioners, the British Medical Association, and Universities to obtain evidence on the causes of the problem, to develop and implement relevant strategy, and to effect fundamental change in healthcare resourcing and planning nationwide."

More information: Quitting patient care and career break intentions among general practitioners in South West England: findings of a census survey of general practitioners, *BMJ Open*, [DOI: 10.1136/bmjopen-2017-015853](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2017-015853)

Provided by University of Exeter

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