

# Tired of Being a Doctor? Choices for Opting Out of Medicine

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## Introduction

While the road into medicine is clearly marked, the trail leading out is tougher to discern. There are plenty of opportunities, experts say, but identifying them -- and selecting the right path -- may challenge career-changing doctors to develop some new skills.



In 2010, 24% of the 2400 physicians responding to a Physician's Foundation survey said they plan to drop out of clinical practice in the next 1 to 3 years by switching jobs. Of those, half said they plan to find a nonclinical job within healthcare, while the other half plan to leave healthcare entirely.

Which begs the question: What are they going to do?

### **Do Doctors Unwittingly Limit Themselves?**

Doctors identify themselves with their profession more strongly than people in other fields. They don't just practice medicine, they *are* doctors. Healers. Physicians.

But by defining themselves so narrowly, doctors may be shortchanging themselves.

"Physicians are generally well suited to do almost anything they want," says Heather Fork, MD, an Austin, Texas-based career coach. "If they've made it far enough to become a physician it means they're intelligent, dedicated, hardworking and able to work under stress and pressure. Those are qualities that can be applied to any career. The door is wide open, but I think a lot of physicians underestimate what they're capable of."

They're also increasingly taking on leadership roles: serving on quality committees, leading departments, and acting as power users and champions for new EHR and clinical informatics tools.

Flexing those leadership muscles has made physicians more interested in -- and more qualified for -- a widening array of leadership positions, says Paul Esselman, Senior Vice President and Managing Principal of St. Louis, Missouri-based Cejka Search.

During the past decade, hospitals and health systems have become much more interested in hiring physicians for leadership positions. Recognizing the opportunity, more and more doctors are pursuing advanced degrees, such as MBAs, MHAs, and MMAs, as well as additional training through organizations such as the American College of Physician Executives.

Although continuing education can be an important differentiator and demonstrate a candidate's commitment, Esselman underscores that degrees aren't a substitute for experience. He advises would-be leaders to develop their skills and experience by serving on committees and pursuing leadership opportunities within their organizations and communities.

He also encourages them to learn more about the career path.

"If you think you want to go down a leadership development path, you need to talk with existing physician leaders," he says. Doctors may be accustomed to taking responsibility for their own conduct, he notes, but becoming a medical director or a vice president of medical affairs often means assuming responsibility for other physicians' conduct and performance. "That is something they'd have to feel comfortable with. That is one of the key elements of leadership."

## **Leaving the Profession Altogether**

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Some doctors may want to move up, but others may want to move out. For those, the career path can become harder to track, says Joseph Kim, MD, founder of the Website [nonclinicaljobs.com](http://nonclinicaljobs.com) and president of Newtown, Pennsylvania-based Medical Communications Media.

Medicine is a specialized and in many ways isolating profession, he says. As a result, "doctors don't know enough people who work in nonmedical settings. They are very uninformed, and so they're skeptical about making big shifts."

If doctors want to segue into a nonclinical career with a pharmaceutical company, device manufacturer, consulting firm, health plan, technology vendor, medical communications company, or large corporation, however, they need to acquire some business savvy, Dr. Kim says, because businesses don't function like hospitals.

They also need to learn more about how the outside world functions, Dr. Kim says.

He says many doctors are accustomed to calling the shots and can chafe in a corporate setting. They may struggle to take direction from a boss who hasn't had as much training as they have or hate the idea of business travel. Most important is that they must learn to work on teams.

"It's a different world," Esselman notes. "They have to be able to collaborate and work within teams and influence people without having direct authority over a group. When you move from clinical practice to a corporate role you go from being a sole decision-maker within your practice to collaborating. They have to understand that."

Dr. Kim advises every doctor to learn critical networking skills. They need to learn to use LinkedIn and other social media tools and how to repackage their CVs as effective resumes that show organizations what they have to offer.

## **How to Find "This Is What I Was Born to Do"**

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Not everyone veers gently into another career. Some people -- doctors included -- take a hard left and pursue interests that lead them into entirely new territory. Anton Chekhov, Somerset Maugham, and William Carlos Williams -- all physicians -- are remembered for their writing, not their medical careers. David Williams, a Canadian ER doc, is well known as an astronaut. Ron Paul and Howard Dean moved from medicine to politics.

But finding that "this is what I was born to do" career can take work.

"A lot of doctors come to me confused and unhappy and they aren't sure what they could or should do," says Dr. Fork.

Fork identifies all too well. After 9 years as a dermatologist, she sold her practice in 2008 without a clear next step.

"I just wasn't enjoying dermatology as much as I thought I would," she says. She knew she wanted to help people, but 15-minute office visits weren't satisfying that desire. It was in reading a self-assessment book that she had her

"a-ha" moment.

"I love the self-assessment process," she says, "but it wasn't until I read that book that I realized coaching would be a good fit for me." She found an accredited coach-training program, completed their training program, and in 2010 launched her coaching practice, Doctor's Crossing.

## Accounting for the Reality Factor

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Self-assessment is essential for anyone looking to make a transition, Dr. Fork says. People need to have a firm grasp of bread-and-butter issues: How long can I afford not to work? Do my spouse and family support my decision? How much do I need to earn? But they also need to have a firm grasp of their skills and interests.



"They need to see what sort of an environment they want to work in and how they'll make a difference in the world going forward," she says. While the assessment process may uncover gaps in a doctor's experience or education, Dr. Fork cautions physicians against haphazardly pursuing additional degrees.

"Doctors know how to jump through hoops and get degrees and credentials," she says, and they may need additional training to pursue certain avenues. "But you can spend a few years and \$100,000 earning a degree and it may not get you where you want to go. You need to do the soul-searching first."

Looking back, Kim admits that the master of public health degree he earned after leaving his residency in internal medicine probably didn't advance his career.

"It was definitely intimidating," he says, of search for a nonclinical career. "I had 4 or 5 ideas of what I could pursue, but at the end of the day I didn't have any guidance. I think I was very naive and didn't know what my options were."

After working for a short time developing interactive Web-based wellness programs, Dr. Kim landed at Medical Communications Media in 2006. Today, in addition to running the company, he pursues a handful of sidelines. He operates a handful of Websites, consults, and coaches physicians considering career changes.

"Doctors like helping people," he says. "I like helping people."

And that's a quality any organization can use.

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