

- Getting involved in research may be of value. This allows you to gain practical experience and to publish papers in rheumatology journals, which will help in your application for an SpR post.
- Locum SpR appointments are a good way to gain experience at a more senior level and make local contacts. This experience will count towards your clinical training once you become an SpR if you are in a LAT post (Locum appointment for training). LAS posts (locum appointment for service) do not count for SpR training, but this should not stop you from applying.
- SpR post application forms all have a section for management and teacher training courses attended, so it is essential to book yourself onto them.

## Research

- Some SpRs take time out of their clinical training to undertake a period of research of between 1–3 years, often aiming towards an MD or PhD
- Research can be in basic science/immunology, but also in medical education, epidemiology or clinical studies.
- Regions such as Manchester and South Thames provide a part time MSc course in Rheumatology which some may find more appealing than studying for a degree such as an MD or PhD.
- Research is not compulsory but allows you to step back from the rigours of clinical medicine and develop a specialist interest that will benefit your professional development and subsequent clinical practice.

## Conclusion

Rheumatology is an exciting and expanding field. Rheumatologists have excellent communication skills and general medical knowledge and work closely with other health professionals. Consultant numbers will certainly increase and there are good opportunities for research in both laboratory and clinical fields.

### Contact details

British Society for Rheumatology

- 020 7242 3313
- [www.rheumatology.org.uk](http://www.rheumatology.org.uk)

Dr Inam Haq  
BSR National Trainee representative  
Contact via BSR

Dr Ian Giles  
BSR National trainee representative  
Contact via BSR

#### Other sites of interest:

Arthritis research campaign:  
[www.arc.org.uk](http://www.arc.org.uk)  
American College of Rheumatology:  
[www.rheumatology.org](http://www.rheumatology.org)

# A career in RHEUMATOLOGY

A GUIDE FOR MEDICAL STUDENTS, HOUSE OFFICERS AND SENIOR HOUSE OFFICERS

## What is rheumatology, and why is it important?

The specialty of rheumatology covers a wide range of conditions affecting joints, periarticular structures, bones, muscles and other body systems.

In developed countries, musculoskeletal diseases are the commonest cause of longstanding disability in adults – particularly back pain in under 50 year olds and osteoarthritis in older adults. Osteoporosis (thin bones) is also a large public health problem, with one in three women likely to have an osteoporotic fracture at the wrist, hip or spine in their lifetime. As the population ages, musculoskeletal disability will increase and it is essential that there are specialists in musculoskeletal disease to deal with these problems.

The current President of the Royal College of Physicians is a Professor of rheumatology!

## What do rheumatologists do?

Rheumatology can be practised as a single specialty or in combination with General Medicine (GIM). Rheumatology is predominantly an out-patient specialty. We see patients of all ages with a wide variety of acute and chronic musculoskeletal problems, some of which are listed in the table below. We liaise closely with primary care doctors, orthopaedic surgeons and the multidisciplinary team (nurses, physiotherapists, occupational therapists, podiatrists). Rheumatology is a practical specialty. In the table below are listed some of the procedures that can be performed.

### Conditions treated by rheumatologists

Osteoarthritis  
Back pain and soft tissue problems  
Rheumatoid arthritis  
Autoimmune rheumatic disease

- Systemic lupus erythematosus (SLE)
- Scleroderma
- Vasculitis

Osteoporosis and other metabolic bone diseases  
Sports medicine

#### Procedures

Joint aspiration and injection  
Synovial fluid microscopy  
Epidural injections and nerve root blocks  
Nerve conduction studies/electromyography  
Soft tissue and joint ultrasound

## Current situation

- There are currently approximately 210 SpRs, and 470 consultants in the UK.
- Opportunities for dual training in rheumatology and GIM vary with region.
- There are excellent opportunities for flexible training.

Training in rheumatology and GIM necessitates resident on-call duties. Pure rheumatology on-call is not present at all hospitals, but when it is, is usually non-resident.

A ratio of 1 consultant rheumatologist per 85000 population is the stated goal. Many areas of the country are badly served and consultant numbers will certainly increase. The RCP estimates a 61% expansion in consultant numbers by 2010, so job prospects are good.

## What type of person makes a good rheumatologist?

- Good communication and diagnostic skills
- Empathy, patience and skilled at dealing with complex psychosocial issues.
- Liking or aptitude for practical procedures
- Able to work in a team
- Wants to apply anatomy and immunology knowledge to clinical practice.

## Advantages of a career in rheumatology

1. Rheumatology allows an excellent opportunity to practice clinical medicine in its broadest sense. Rheumatic diseases such as vasculitis and SLE affect many body systems so a good general medical knowledge is essential.
2. Anatomy learned as a medical student is used in a practical way, in order to help make a diagnosis and guide treatment.
3. A knowledge of immunology is important as this forms the basis to understanding the pathology behind rheumatic diseases and the rationale for use of new biological therapies.
4. A holistic approach is taken towards patient care, taking in to account not only their medical problems, but the effect of these problems on their social and psychological wellbeing. A long term relationship is built up between doctor and patients with chronic rheumatic disease.
5. Lots of opportunity to develop a subspecialty interest and combine this with research and GIM if wanted.
6. Superb opportunities for flexible training
7. Manageable on-call duties.

As you can see, rheumatologists do not just need to know about bones and joints. This makes the specialty both challenging and exciting. We are often called the “*last of the general physicians*” because of our broad general medical knowledge!

## New developments

This is an exciting time to work in the field of rheumatology. Increasing knowledge about the immunological basis for many rheumatic diseases has allowed the development of biological therapies to treat inflammatory joint disease such as rheumatoid arthritis. Drugs that block the tumour necrosis factor receptor (Infliximab and Etanercept) are now used and many more will become available in the future.

New non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs that have less gastrointestinal side effects (the COX-2 selective drugs) are also available.

# What can I do now?

## Medical Student

All clinical training programmes will include exposure to orthopaedics and rheumatology. This will give you a taste for the specialty but you may not get as much experience as you would like. If the subject interests you, it may be worth thinking about undertaking a BSc in a rheumatology related discipline such as immunology.

The arthritis research campaign (**arc**) awards an annual prize to each UK medical school. The prize may be for an essay or case report. If you are interested contact your medical school department of rheumatology for further details.

## PRHO/SHO

Hands on experience in rheumatology will give you further help in deciding whether it is the career for you and is important if you are to successfully obtain an NTN in rheumatology as there is a lot of competition for posts

1. Find an SHO rotation that includes rheumatology. If this is not possible, some rheumatology posts are “stand-alone” and can be applied for after your general medical rotation has finished. MRCP (part 1) is often required for these posts.
2. Introduce yourself to the rheumatology team in your hospital. Arrange to sit in on clinics if possible. This is a good way of making contacts and gaining experience. The RCP have Regional Specialty Advisors for each medical specialty. They will also be able to put you in contact with people who may be able to help.