

Medical illustrator

Job Description

Medical illustrators develop and provide resources for professionals involved in patient care, teaching, education and research. They may specialise in medical photography, graphic design or videography. They are employed by hospitals, medical schools, research establishments, universities, specialist publishers and private companies. This is a varied role that demands technical ability, an understanding of anatomy and good interpersonal skills.

Photographers and video producers are involved with delivering visual records of patients' conditions, operations and treatments for medical files, education and research. Graphic designers and artists create artwork for posters, leaflets, audio-visual lecture material, websites and corporate publications.

Typical Work Activities

The work varies according to the size of the hospital department or private company. A hospital department usually has a number of medical illustrators and perhaps one member of staff (or more) who specialises in video filming and production. Activities for clinical photographers and videographers typically involve:

- taking photographs or films of patients (often concentrating on just one part of the body that has been affected by illness or injury) and processing the images/film;
- undertaking more specialised photography, such as 3-D imaging or using specialist cameras, to photograph the structures of a particular part of the body (e.g. the eye, photographing the lens, cornea and retina);
- arranging the necessary consents from patients;
- taking photographs or films of medical equipment to be used by clinicians for teaching purposes;
- taking photographs of hospital personnel, buildings and events for use in publicity materials and using desktop publishing packages to produce materials such as the hospital trust's newspaper or annual report;
- specialising in specific areas of photography, e.g. bereavement photography (photographing babies that have been stillborn or have died shortly after birth, for parents to keep in remembrance) or forensic photography (photographing 'non-accidental injuries', such as human bite marks);
- using computers to download, edit and process digital images or films, using software packages such as Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator, or Kodak Photo Desk;
- at more senior levels, managing and training staff.

Activities for artists and graphic designers typically involve:

- producing artwork and designs for posters and patient information leaflets;
- producing presentations, posters, illustrations and slides or overhead transparencies of patients and treatment procedures for use in lectures, conferences and medical journals;
- designing websites, such as hospital trusts' websites, for patients, doctors and the general public;
- designing the layout for annual reports and other corporate material.

Work Conditions

- The profession is currently undergoing a lot of change, including the introduction of a state register for medical photographers which, according to the Institute of Medical Illustrators (IMI) (www.imi.org.uk), will open in 2010. Pay and conditions for medical illustrators within the National Health Service are covered by the Agenda for Change (www.nhsemployers.org/pay-conditions/agenda-for-change.cfm). More information is available at NHS Careers (www.nhscareers.nhs.uk).
- The typical starting salary for medical illustrators is around £18,200 (salary data collected Jan 09).
- Senior medical illustrators can earn up to £32,000 and a head of department at a university teaching hospital can earn up to £50,000 (salary data collected Jan 09).
- There is more flexibility in university teaching hospitals' pay scales: departments are usually larger, so senior staff have greater responsibility and commensurately higher salaries.
- Income can be increased with freelance work in photography, illustration for medical books, or web design.
- Working hours usually range from 37 to 40+ hours a week, Monday to Friday. There may be an occasional need to work evenings on call, particularly in hospitals that provide emergency services.
- Work is generally in a team environment, liaising with other illustration staff and medical and healthcare professionals, as well as outside contacts, such as printers.
- As well as the technical side, this job may involve working closely with patients and may sometimes be distressing.
- Illustrators who specialise in photography spend much of their time working in departmental photographic studios. Graphic designers and medical artists are largely office-based with little or no interaction with patients.
- Dress is usually casual, with smarter clothes worn for events. If you are working in a clinical environment, hygiene and protective clothing guidelines must be observed.
- Self-employment and freelance work are often possible, as are job-sharing and part-time work.
- A substantial proportion of entrants are women.
- Jobs are available in most areas of the UK, wherever there are hospitals, but competition may be stiff.
- Illustrators who do photographic work for a hospital trust may have to travel to various hospital sites to photograph patients in wards, clinics or operating theatres.
- Overnight absence from home is uncommon, as is overseas work or travel.

Entry Requirements

The profession is moving towards making each area of work more specialised and professionally recognised. As a result, entry requirements are changing and routes in vary according to whether you intend to work as a medical photographer or a medical illustrator. It is important to check with the relevant professional body about the required qualifications.

Relevant degree/HND subjects include:

- medical illustration;
- clinical photography (the University of Westminster (www.wmin.ac.uk/) has the first full-time course in the UK starting September 2009);
- photography;
- graphic design/illustration.

If you are following a relevant, recognised course of study or training, you are entitled to join the Institute of Medical Illustrators (IMI) (www.imi.org.uk) as a student member and enjoy all the benefits of full membership.

The Health Professions Council (HPC) (www.hpc-uk.org) has agreed to state registration for medical photographers, who will need formal qualifications in order to register when the register opens in 2010. A degree in clinical photography or another photography degree will be required (qualifications from the British Institute of Professional Photography (BIPP) (www.bipp.com) will be accepted), plus three years' relevant work experience. Details of entry routes are available from Medical Illustration UK Ltd (www.migroup.co.uk/) and the education page on the Institute of Medical Illustrators (IMI) (www.imi.org.uk) website. Requirements vary according to the applicant's experience and background.

Diplomates and graduates with qualifications in graphic design, illustration or photography should aim to find an employer willing to allow them to study part time for a graduate or postgraduate degree in medical illustration. Alternatively, they should consider upgrading their qualification to a degree through further full-time study.

Entry without a degree or HND is not possible.

Candidates will need to show evidence of the following:

- a genuine interest in the scientific application of their skills and in the treatment of disease;
- time management and organisational skills;
- technical and/or creative, artistic ability;
- excellent attention to detail and a methodical approach;
- a sensitive and tactful attitude and the ability to deal confidently with a range of people and quickly establish a rapport with the patients or health care professionals;
- an understanding of anatomy and biology;
- IT literacy, as each specialism involves substantial work on computers, both Apple Macs and PCs;
- a reasonable level of physical fitness, as you may be required to lift and carry equipment.

It will be essential to have a good portfolio of your work with examples of clear, detailed images.

Pre-entry experience such as a placement or project, perhaps as part of a degree course, would be very helpful, as would any experience of working in a caring capacity. It is a good idea to contact the medical illustration department in your local hospital and ask about visiting the department and possibly undertaking an unpaid placement.

It is illegal for employers to discriminate against candidates on the grounds of age, gender, race, disability, sexual orientation or religious faith. For more information on equality and diversity in the job market, see Handling Discrimination (www.prospects.ac.uk/links/discrimination).

Training

Graduates entering medical illustration departments start by gaining some experience on the job and then taking further qualifications. Changes to the profession mean that entry routes and qualifications vary, so it is important to check with the relevant professional body about training and study options.

There are two distance learning courses aimed at people already working as medical illustrators:

- Staffordshire University's Medical Illustration Programme (www.staffs.ac.uk/schools/art_and_design/underinfo/medical_ill.htm);
- the medical illustration programmes at the Cardiff University School of Healthcare Studies (www.cardiff.ac.uk/sohcs/).

The graduate certificate is for people with a first degree in a related discipline or at least three years' experience in medical illustration and the postgraduate certificate is aimed at people wanting further insight into the more theoretical aspects of the job, with a view to perhaps undertaking a Masters course.

The Institute of Medical Illustrators (IMI) (www.imi.org.uk) offers a programme of continuing professional development (CPD). This has been revised to reflect the requirements of the Health Professions Council (HPC) (www.hpc-uk.org). As well as CPD, maintaining a personal professional portfolio, making contacts and keeping up to date through professional bodies such as the IMI and the British Institute of Professional Photography (BIPP) (www.bipp.com) will benefit career development.

Career Development

With the introduction of state registration for medical photographers and likely changes as a result of the National Health Service (NHS) Agenda for Change (www.nhsemployers.org/pay-conditions/agenda-for-change.cfm) programme, routes for career progression in hospital departments are evolving (see NHS Careers (www.nhscareers.nhs.uk)). Currently, in hospital trusts, medical illustrators are employed as healthcare scientists at levels ranging from the basic grade for Diplomates to a role as a chief medical illustrator or head of department. Some heads of department may be employed on NHS administrative scales.

Currently, Diplomates are likely to stay at the starting grade for around three years until they have obtained a qualification in medical illustration. Graduates are more likely to enter at one level above this or, if they do start at the basic grade, they could expect to progress to the next grade within two or three years.

Promotion to the next three grades depends on the size of the medical illustration department and on local interpretation of the grades. The work at this level would involve more technical complexity, but would not necessarily involve managing staff. After that, promotion prospects may be limited, especially for people working in a small department, and relocation may be essential for those who wish to progress further.

Opportunities for specialisation and for promotion tend to be greater in universities. Even so, the largest departments are unlikely to employ more than about 20 medical illustrators, who are supported by ancillary and technical staff. Some senior-level medical illustration staff move into health service or university administration.

There are also opportunities within private companies that provide medical services or develop medical or pharmaceutical products. Progression here will depend on the individual employer.

Many medical illustrators also undertake freelance work. This usually increases with experience and contacts.

Typical Employers

This is a small profession with a total of about 1,000 medical illustrators employed in the UK.

Around half are employed by hospital trusts and most of the rest work for university medical schools. The larger departments are generally found in university hospitals, particularly in cities such as London, Birmingham, Cambridge, Oxford, Cardiff and Glasgow. Some medical illustration departments have only a handful of staff, and there are even a few 'one-man bands', with just a single medical illustrator providing photography, graphic design and related services.

A limited number of posts are also found in private hospitals and medical facilities, and also with private companies that provide medical services or develop medical or pharmaceutical products.

A few medical photographers work entirely on a self-employed or freelance basis. Numbers may increase as hospital trusts generate more private initiatives.

The number of medical illustrators in the UK is relatively small at around a thousand. Numbers have been broadly stable in recent years, but may increase in the future in line with rising demands for professional graphics, photography and video services in the health sector.

Sources of Vacancies

- British Journal of Photography (www.bjphoto.co.uk);
- Creative Review (www.creativereview.co.uk);
- Design Week (www.designweek.co.uk);
- NHS Jobs (www.jobs.nhs.uk);
- NHS Scotland Jobs (www.jobs.scot.nhs.uk);
- Ophthalmic Imaging Association (OIA) (www.oia.org.uk);
- Institute of Medical Illustrators (IMI) (www.imi.org.uk);
- Medical Illustration UK Ltd (www.migroup.co.uk);
- individual hospital or medical school websites;
- web design studios and graphic art studios for freelance work;
- local and national press.

Recruitment agencies rarely handle vacancies. Some employers may approach art and design colleges or individual course leaders.

Related Occupations

- Graphic designer
- Illustrator
- Multimedia specialist
- Photographer
- Press photographer

Information Sources

Bibliography

AGCAS and Graduate Prospects products are available from higher education careers services.

AGCAS Publications

[Handling Discrimination](#), AGCAS Information Booklet

[Health Sector](#), AGCAS Sector Briefing

[Options with Fine Art](#), AGCAS Options Series

[Options with Graphic Design](#), AGCAS Options Series

[Science Sector](#), AGCAS Sector Briefing

Other Publications

[British Journal of Photography](#), Incisive Media Ltd, Weekly

[Creative Review](#), Centaur Media plc, Monthly

[Design Week](#), Centaur Media plc, Weekly

[Working with Light: Careers in Photography and Allied Areas](#), British Institute of Professional Photography (BIPP)

Websites

Agenda for Change, www.nhsemployers.org/pay-conditions/agenda-for-change.cfm

Medical Illustration UK Ltd, www.migroup.co.uk/

NHS Careers, www.nhscareers.nhs.uk

NHS Jobs, www.jobs.nhs.uk

NHS Scotland Jobs, www.jobs.scot.nhs.uk

Ophthalmic Imaging Association (OIA), www.oia.org.uk/

Staffordshire University's Medical Illustration Programme,
www.staffs.ac.uk/schools/art_and_design/underinfo/medical_ill.htm

Addresses

British Institute of Professional Photography (BIPP), 1 Prebendal Court, Oxford Road, Aylesbury, Buckinghamshire HP19 8EY Tel: 01296 718530 URL: www.bipp.com

Cardiff University School of Healthcare Studies, Ty Dewi Sant, Heath Park Campus, Cardiff, Wales CF14 4XN URL: www.cardiff.ac.uk/sohcs/

Committee for the Accreditation of Medical Illustration Practitioners (CAMIP), 31 Mardley Hill, Welwyn, Hertfordshire AL6 0TT URL: www.camip.org.uk

Health Professions Council (HPC), Park House, 184 Kennington Park Road, London SE11 4BU Tel: 020 7582 0866 URL: www.hpc-uk.org

Institute of Medical Illustrators (IMI), 29 Arboretum Street, Nottingham NG1 4JA URL: www.imi.org.uk

Medical Artists' Association of Great Britain (MAA), Medical Illustration UK Ltd, Charing Cross Hospital, London W6 8RF Tel: 020 88467165 URL: www.maa.org.uk/

University of Westminster, 115 New Cavendish Street, London W1W 6UW Tel: 020 7911 5000 URL: www.wmin.ac.uk/