**EPISODE 196 What Do Nonclinical Jobs Actually Pay? Here Are The Details**

**With Dr. Heather Fork**

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HF: “Money should never be a reason to be miserable or stay stuck in your job. There is a key for those golden handcuffs. And the key is making a commitment to what's important to you in your life and your career, and taking steps to have this vision of what you want become your reality.”

Welcome to The Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. If you're questioning your career in medicine, you've come to the right place. I'm Heather Fork, a former dermatologist and founder of The Doctor's Crossing. As a master certified coach, I've helped hundreds of physicians find greater happiness in their career, whether in medicine, a nonclinical job, or something else. I started this podcast to help you discover the career path that's best for you and give you some resources and encouragement to make it happen. You don't need to get stuck at the white coat crossroads. So, pull up a chair, my friend, and let's carpe that diem.

Hey there, and welcome back to the Doctor's Crossing Carpe Diem podcast. I'm your host, Heather Fork, and you're listening to episode number 196. I really appreciate you being here and listening to the podcast. And I also want to give you kudos for doing something that is helpful for you and your career. I could say, “Oh, you're just coming here for entertainment value. But I wish I were more entertaining. I wish I were funnier.” But I know that seriously, most of you are here for resources and finding out ways to move forward from the white coat crossroads and be happier in your career.

To that end, I want to talk about something today that I find often keeps people stuck when they don't have concrete information. And that is knowing what nonclinical careers actually pay. For example, it's not uncommon that I hear a physician say, “Well, I feel trapped at the white coat crossroads. I have those golden handcuffs because I'm making this amount of money. I'm the primary breadwinner, and I can't afford to take an income hit.” And then I'll ask them, “Well, do you know what nonclinical salaries tend to be?” And they will say, “Well, no, not really.”

But there's this assumption that if you're doing something that's not taking care of patients, and that's what you train to do, and you sacrificed all this time, and you have this degree and this license that anything other than that is going to pay you less.

Well, the answer is that really depends on what your specialty is, what you're currently making, what nonclinical job you go into, and also to realize that where you start in a nonclinical job isn't where you necessarily stay. And there can be a lot of upward mobility and advancement in terms of position and compensation. So, let's dive into the details.

I've been coaching for 14 years now, and I've seen physicians go into a wide variety of nonclinical careers from all different entry points in terms of physicians who have just graduated from medical school, to those who didn't complete a residency, to those who are fresh out of residency, and then new clinicians, seasoned clinicians, and towards the latter end of their career. I've seen a lot of different possibilities.

And in general, if we look at that entry level salary, the first job that a physician would get out of clinical practice or out of training, the range typically is somewhere between $80,000 to $330,000. That's again $80,000 to $330,000 for that first entry level job.

If I look at the average of the majority of physicians that I work with, which are physicians who are licensed in the U.S. and they've been practicing a bit after training, that range tends to be around $180,000 to $330,000. And that's the base salary. That's not including other things which we're going to talk about. This is kind of a ballpark area that we're going to talk about.

I just want to say right off the bat, if you're listening to this and you're thinking, I definitely need to make $400,000 or $500,000, or it's not going to be worth it to me, what I would say is hold your horses, because when you get into these positions, there are other things that I'm going to be talking about, such as bonusing and stock options that can increase your salary from the beginning and also over time. And there are ways to advance in your career in these non-clinical jobs where you can get up into $400,000, $500,000. And so, don't rule any of this out of hand. Now, I can't offer you a million. I haven't had anybody who's a neurosurgeon transition to a nonclinical career and match their salary.

Let's look at this in a little more detail about the compensation. In this higher end of this range from $180,000 to $330,000, these jobs tend to be in the areas of health insurance, disability and life insurance, pharma, medical devices and biotech, consulting, physician advising, working for the FDA, the CDC, working in informatics, and some clinical documentation improvement jobs.

I want to give you an idea of what the compensation package could look like for one of these jobs. So let's take an example of a physician who is going into one of these jobs I mentioned above, and they have a base of $240,000. It's not uncommon for there to be a bonus that can range from 5% to 35% or higher. And these bonuses can be based on the employee performance, the company performance, and or a combination of both. And it's not uncommon for this bonus to be pretty regular and reliable. It's not guaranteed, but it's something that my clients have told me that they're getting fairly regularly. For example, if there's a base of $240,000 with a 25% bonus, that would add an extra $60,000 for the year, bringing the total salary to $300,000. If the base is $300,000 and there's a 25% bonus, that's an additional $75,000 and the compensation comes to $375,000. So, it can make a big difference depending on what the bonus structure is.

In addition, if the company you're working for is publicly traded, they may offer you stock options. And these can be stock options that invest over time. For example, each year you are given a certain amount of stock, or you can buy it at a certain price that's reduced. And by staying longer at the company, you can get the full benefit of the options.

Depending on how the company is doing, this can also be a significant part of your compensation package. The benefits also include what you're often used to seeing in clinical practice, which is health insurance. You might have life and disability insurance, dental insurance, 401(k) matching, CME money, vacation time, sick days, and personal days.

And what I've seen with some companies is that they have flex time where they don't specify a certain number of vacation days. They say, what we care about is that you get your work done and that you have some coverage when you're away, but otherwise you can take as much time off as you want. I know that's a bit unusual, but I've definitely heard it on a number of occasions with various companies.

While we're discussing the compensation packages, I just want to take a moment to give a shout out to our sponsor, PearsonRavitz. PearsonRavitz offers life insurance and disability policies for physicians and other individuals working in healthcare industry. They specialize in helping you have the best coverage to ensure that if an unexpected illness or accident or injury happens, that you have the best coverage.

Now, if you have coverage through an employer, that's great to have disability insurance, but you don't want to rely 100% on that. Typically, it's not going to be complete comprehensive coverage. It's not going to be the best you can buy. And there often will be fine print that will make exceptions in areas where you don't want to have exceptions.

If you'd like to review your current coverage or look into a new policy, you can reach out to PearsonRavitz at pearsonravitz.com. And I will put that link in the show notes. They offer complimentary consultations.

All right, coming back to our episode, I want to talk a little bit about the non-clinical areas where a physician might be making at the lower end of this salary range, especially initially. This could be in the salary range of $80,000 to $175,000.

One of the areas is medical writing. And a reason for this is because you don't have to typically be a licensed physician to go into medical writing. You're competing with other candidates who are not expecting a physician's salary, and the company doesn't need to pay a physician's salary. It doesn't mean that you aren't deserving of one. I have seen medical writing jobs start at $80,000, $125,000, and $175,000. And that doesn't mean that that's the ceiling for those jobs. I definitely know physicians who started at the lower end in medical writing and they've gone up higher even to the $200,000 category.

Certain areas of medical writing tend to pay more, such as regulatory writing. And there are physicians, too, who might first start out in an employed position and then go into freelance writing, where they can have subcontractors under them. And their upside potential and income is really unlimited.

Another example is in the pharmaceutical industry. We have the medical science liaison role. And you don't need to have an MD or a DO to be a medical science liaison. Those salaries tend to be on the lower end. They may start at $125,000, $150,000, $175,000. But if you are a physician in this role, over time, you can increase your salary into the $200,000. It can also be a gateway into another area of pharma where you could make more money. And this is where some of the confusion can come in, in the pharmaceutical industry and salaries. Because, say, for example, there are drug safety jobs.

And there are drug safety jobs for a physician who has a license and is board certified. And those often pay in $200,000, $300,000 range. But there are also drug safety jobs for someone who doesn't have an MD or DO license. And the compensation is going to be much lower. These are different entry-level points. And the compensation is commensurately different.

Public health jobs tend to be a bit lower in the compensation range. But that can really vary depending on who you're working for, what your role is, how long you've been there. So you may start lower than you'd really ideally like to. But for some people, this is work that's very satisfying. They're wanting to do it and they're OK with taking a bit of a pay cut. There are entry-level jobs in public health, which might be something for an international medical graduate that might start in the $90,000, $100,000, $120,000, $150,000 range. And for physicians who are licensed here, they might start $185,000, $200,000, and then they can go up. But it's going to be typically, obviously, less than if you're in the pharmaceutical industry.

To help illustrate the situation where we're looking at our career, and it's really not just about the money, there are other factors, of course, weighing in, I wanted to share an example from one of my coaching clients. She gave me her permission. And for purposes of protecting her privacy, I'm going to call her Dr. Lisa, but that's not a real name.

Dr. Lisa works with cancer patients. She's been doing this for over 20 years. She's making over $500,000 and not working full-time. Some of her income comes from revenue from surgery centers, which would not continue if she left this job. As part of her homework in the coaching program, I had her write a commitment statement. And her commitment statement was, “I commit to overcoming inertia and fear of rejection to move into a career that offers new challenges and opportunities for advancement.” And I asked her, why is this important to her? And she said, “Despite a good income and outward appearance of success, I feel stuck in a dead-end job where I'm not the best version of myself anymore. And that makes me feel bad about myself.”

I asked her to explain what was making her feel bad about herself. And she said, “I really have compassion fatigue. I try very hard to show my patients empathy and that I care about them, but I'm not feeling it.” She said, “It's so important that our patients feel cared about and know that they have a doctor who has empathy for them.” But she says, “I just have trouble feeling it. So I'm having to pretend.” And she says she doesn't like that. That's not right for the patients. It's not right for her. And she says, “I just don't necessarily want to be their doctor anymore.”

She started taking some time off to see if she would feel differently, but she has a sense that it's not necessarily something that's going to go away just by taking a break. She is more than willing at this point to cut her salary by 50% to look at a nonclinical job. She's looking forward to helping have a positive impact on patients and a larger scale rather than one-to-one. And she also wants to continue to grow and learn and develop in her career. And she just doesn't feel like that's possible in what she's doing right now. Yes, the money is great. Yes, she's not even working full time, but she doesn't like having to pretend that she feels this compassion and empathy when she doesn't really.

When you think about your own situation, what's really important to you? I know a lot of you say flexibility. You want to be able to go to your kids' activities or pick them up from school. You'd like to be able to come home and not have to get on the computer and get on the EMR and do your charts. You'd like to not be on call and come home tired and exhausted. There's a high cost to not being able to be the person that you want to be. And it may also be that you want to take care of yourself better. If you're not able to exercise and eat healthy and get the sleep that you need, that's a high cost that can subtract from your income. If you could put a dollar value on being healthy yourself and having time for friends and family and hobbies and being a person, is that worth $10,000? Is it worth $20,000? Maybe it's $100,000 to have that be part of your life.

Another thing I wanted to mention, again, is where you start in terms of salary is not necessarily where you will end up or stay. There's a great example of Dr. Michael McLaughlin. He wrote the book “Do You Feel Like You Wasted All That Training?” And in that book, he describes a story about how he was in his fellowship as a plastic hand surgeon, and he realized that he did not want to do this and he could not see himself staying in this career, but he had no idea what to do. So he paid attention to what really interested him and he loved writing. He started doing medical writing, writing articles, seeing if he could get published. And long story short, he ended up getting a job as a medical writer in a medical communications company. And he was not making much money.

He was working like a resident, but he was able to increase his skills, understand the industry, be very successful, and he ended up co-founding his own medical communications company. And he said on multiple occasions, “I never thought I could replace or even exceed my income as a plastic hand surgeon.” And he did, starting out as a medical writer.

Something else to think about is if you are in a high income specialty, you may decide that quality of life is more important to you and you're at a time when you can make changes. And it could be that changing up what you're doing, for example, going to more of 08:00 to 05:00 job gives you the bandwidth to do something on the side. You might do some consulting, you might work in artificial intelligence, you might start your own business, you might get into real estate. And that can be for anybody. It can be for anyone. It doesn't have to be a high income specialty earner. I'm just using this to illustrate that when we have more time, we have more bandwidth and headspace, we have room to develop things on the side, which could also replace our income and also bring in more satisfaction.

In wrapping up this podcast, I just want to say that I've mentioned different figures here. And if you're in a certain job and you hear this and you say, “Well, I'm making more than that, and I'm a medical writer, I'm making more than that, and I'm in public health”, just know that these are just ballpark figures and everybody's situation is different. But this is just a starting place.

If you're looking into a particular non-clinical sector, the best way to find out accurate information about jobs are through people who are working in the company that you're interested in or the job sector. So, get the information so you know you have accurate guidance.

My punchline for this episode is that money should never be a reason to be miserable or stay stuck in your job. There is a key for those golden handcuffs. And the key is making a commitment to what's important to you in your life and your career and taking steps to have this vision of what you want become your reality.

I want you to take action now, today, not tomorrow, not next week, not next month, because I've seen people have years and even decades go by where they're unhappy, and I don't want that to be you. Think of one thing you can do today that will help you move the needle a little bit towards making some positive changes for yourself. And I'd love to have you email me and tell me what you're doing. So you can email us at team@doctorscrossing.com, and I want to encourage you and cheer you on. You can also ask any question that you might have about salaries.

And lastly, if you'd like some one-on-one help, I do have some space for one-on-one consultations. These are one hour Zoom sessions are my absolute most favorite thing to do, which is coaching. And in that one hour, we can look at your situation, we can talk about options for you, we can come up with a plan for some steps to move forward.

I really love these conversations because I feel in a short period of time, I can really help you feel more positive and hopeful and have a concrete plan. So, if you're interested in scheduling a one-on-one consultation, which can be a one-off session, or it can lead to one of my coaching programs, you can reach out to us at team@doctorscrossing.com, and we'll tell you about how to schedule. And I'll also put the link in the show notes for that email as well as our sponsor, PearsonRavitz.

Thank you so much for listening. Please share the podcast. I know there's probably someone out there you know, who would want to know more about salaries. And don't forget to carpe that diem and I'll see you in the next episode. Bye for now.

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Podcast details

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