

A 7% of Doctors are Temp Workers earning 30% to 50% more than staff Doctors - a 90% increase since 2015

B 2023 Survey says MOST Doctors feel burned out in 2021 it was 42%,

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By GRETCHEN TARRANT

Doctors once turned to part-time work mostly as a transition into retirement. Overloaded and burned out, many in their working prime are now building entire careers as temporary physicians-for-hire.

Franklyn Rocha-Cabrero, a 37-year-old neurologist, went into gig work soon after completing his training, detouring from the traditional track of joining a medical practice or hospital system.

He typically takes at least 10 out of every 30 days off. And he earns an hourly rate that is usually 30% to 40% more than a hospital-staff physician would, he says.

About 50,000 doctors, or 7% of the U.S. physician workforce not including foreign medical-school graduates, now practice medicine via temporary assignments, according to medical-staffing company CHG Healthcare. That is a nearly 90% increase from 2015.

Like traveling nurses, many of these doctors are tapping into booming demand for their services, especially at labor-starved community hospitals around the U.S. Primary-care doctors are the most sought after, according to CHG Healthcare data. So are specialists such as cardiologists, pulmonologists, surgeons and oncologists.

Rocha-Cabrero finished his residency in Miami in 2021, where he says he often juggled more than 20 critically ill patients during night shifts. Next came a neurophysiology fellowship at the University of California-Irvine, where he worked 80 hours a week, much of it on paperwork. His supervisors' schedules were just as grueling.

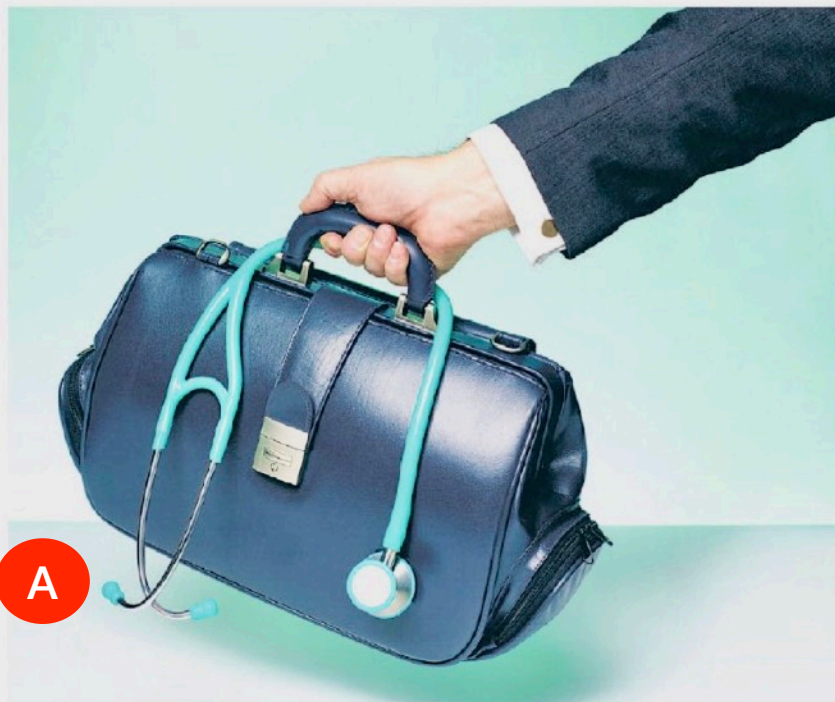
"I didn't want to be a part of that cycle," he says.

He hit the road instead. A gig worker's work now might include a

stint at a hospital in Salinas, Calif., diagnosing epilepsy and other nervous-system disorders, then five to eight days of telemedicine appointments from his home in Long Beach or a stint at another California community or academic hospital.

"It's kind of a roller coaster," he says of his work life. Yet, "I'm able to do so many more things to take care of my physical and mental health that I wasn't able to do before."

Doctors and staffing agencies say working temporary hospital gigs typically can pay 30% to 50% more than what a full-time hospital staff doctor would earn—and sometimes more, depending on the specialty and location. An obstetrician-gynecologist can earn \$140 an hour, while an emergency-medicine doctor can make as much as \$300 an hour, according to Locumstory.com, a resource site for temp-working physicians. That said, they are often on the hook for financing their retire-



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Part-Time Doctors Get Plenty of Practice

A growing group of practitioners are ditching medicine's traditional career path and hitting the road as temporary physicians-for-hire



Franklyn Rocha-Cabrero, a 37-year-old neurologist, says gig work is good for his physical and mental health.



Miechia Esco, a vascular surgeon, has spent nearly a decade as a full-time locum tenens physician, which requires adapting quickly.



Ripal Patel, a 42-year-old emergency physician, has started his own locum tenens practice, citing frustration with corporate medicine.

ment and other benefits.

Many doctors say longer hours and bigger patient loads, especially during the pandemic—have led them to seek alternative careers. In a 2023 survey of more than 9,100 physicians, a majority described themselves as burned out, up from 42% in 2018. Nearly a quarter of those doctors said they had quit jobs or

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sold a practice as a result, according to healthcare website Medscape, which conducted the study. Ripal Patel, 42, an emergency physician who lives in Houston, says corporate medicine's in-

As a contractor, he says, he avoids much of the bureaucratic pressures and productivity metrics many hospital faculty doctors face.

"I don't think I could do anything else now," says Patel, who estimates he earns up to two times what traditional emergency physicians make. He has since started his own locum tenens practice, so that he and colleagues can contract directly with hospitals seeking temp doctors, instead of through a third-party agency.

Temporary gigs can pay 30% to 50% more than what a full-time hospital staff doctor would earn.

The temp-work approach comes with its own challenges Temp doctors have to fulfill credentialing and licensing requirements for each new state or facility in which they practice. They typically get malpractice coverage through the temp agencies with which they work, but the risk of being sued can vary greatly from state to state.

The practice also requires getting up to speed in a new workplace quickly—repeatedly—says Miechia Esco, a vascular surgeon who has been a full-time locum tenens physician for nearly a decade.

"In many instances, you may be the only one out of the facility," she says. "That requires deep knowledge and the flexibility of being able to quickly adapt."

Some medical professionals also worry that greater reliance on temporary doctors can be disruptive to patients.

"On Friday, you got Dr. Jones, but on Saturday, you get the locum. Maybe they didn't get a good step out from Dr. Jones.

Maybe they have to start from scratch because they aren't really clear on what's going on," says Gail Gazelle, a physician coach and assistant professor at Harvard Medical School.

Still, gig-working physicians are often what allows community hospitals, particularly in rural areas, to provide basic services and continual care, hospital administrators argue.

"You want to keep the doors open," says Christy Bray Ricks, vice president of provider talent for Ardent Health Services, which owns and operates hospitals across the country.

And some doctors who've switched to temporary work say patients often fare better with a doctor who can focus entirely on providing care. Rocha-Cabrero says that is now his main focus, rather than the meetings and administrative work that come with a full-time hospital job.

"Instead of paperwork and checklists, I can focus on things that matter," he says.

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: GETTY IMAGES; DR. RIPAL PATEL; DR. ESCO; DR. FRANKLYN ROCHA-CABRERO