

Motorsport medicine: a job in the fast lane



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Eryl Davies and Sam Whitehouse explain how working as motorsport doctors means they always get a trackside view of the race

When we tell people that we spend our free weekends working as motorsport doctors we're always asked how we got into it. For petrolheads and non-petrolheads alike, it is a great way to spend a weekend. You can develop key skills such as communication, team working, and situational awareness, in addition to more specific skills including extrication and resuscitation.

There is always a need for more motorsport doctors, and with 16 race circuits in the United Kingdom running races from March to October there are plenty of opportunities to get involved. Meetings are held most weekends for up to three days each. Motorsport is not restricted to the race track. Its 22 disciplines

also include rallycross, drag racing, and karting, governed by Motorsport UK, which is affiliated to the world governing body of four or more wheeled motorsport, the Fédération Internationale de l'Automobile.

The minimum crew requirement depends on the event and includes a doctor or paramedic registered with Motorsport UK on each rescue unit. Venues should have a medical centre that is properly equipped and maintained, with detailed records. At each event a nominated chief medical officer manages the team and liaises with the race officials. The chief medical officer has the authority to request a competitor's Motorsport UK licence to be withdrawn on medical grounds.

The job

Motorsport medicine challenges our expectations. We often witness unexpected collisions in real time, a phenomenon that is rarely encountered elsewhere. However, serious accidents are rare: drivers can be in a 100 mile an hour collision and walk away unharmed. The low injury rate is largely due to the mandatory head and neck safety (HANS) devices and adaptation of the track and cars beyond the comfort of road vehicles. The mechanism of injury even depends on the model of the car being raced.

We face unpredictable environmental challenges: cold, water, fire, darkness, entrapment, nearby objects, and the public. We have a duty of care to spectators and staff, as well as the pressure of treating our patients while minimising delays to the race schedule. Doctors take on a high level of personal risk by working on the track. These factors make motorsport medicine different from other pre-hospital work. You should enjoy being outside the comfort zone of a secure, air-conditioned resuscitation bay.

How did I get involved?

The best place to start is by contacting the chief medical officer of the circuit, who you can contact via the circuit manager. Others accompany doctors who they know there. Doctors should shadow a few meetings until they have some experience and can be employed as race medics. Rates vary between circuits and events.

The skill set is transferrable from many specialties. As motorsport doctors we work with anaesthetists, emergency physicians, intensivists, and trauma and orthopaedic surgeons. The ability to work under pressure and good situational awareness are crucial. Your behaviour around the track is of the utmost importance, not only for professionalism but for everyone's safety.

Motorsport doctors need fire retardant overalls, as well as gloves and boots recommended for hazardous environments. A rucksack is also useful to hold a Motorsport UK licence, sun cream, sunglasses, snacks, and any additional clothing.

Motorsport medics need a valid licence to practise and recognised indemnity for work outside a hospital. Doctors need to ensure that they can work outside their approved practice setting, as set out in the General Medical Council requirements.

Foundation level doctors are not allowed to work but can shadow other doctors. Trainees should declare any work to their educational supervisor and training programme director and must be supervised by a consultant.

Doctors also need to obtain the official Motorsport UK licence for identification purposes. Motorsport UK stipulates that it is desirable for an applicant to have successfully attended certain life support courses. Valid advanced life support and advanced trauma life support certificates are recommended before seeking pre-hospital training. A number of pre-hospital courses are available, including pre-hospital trauma life support and pre-hospital emergency care.

Further information about licensing and regulations is in the latest Motorsport UK yearbook, which can be downloaded from www.motorsportuk.org