

## Real-life story - Susan Meredith

Recently retired, Susan Meredith loved her role in decontamination/sterile services and now chairs the Institute of Decontamination Sciences.

### Susan Meredith

**Chair of the Institute of Decontamination Sciences and retired assistant decontamination lead/sterile services manager, Southend University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust**

#### Employer or university

Formerly Southend University Hospital NHS Foundation Trust

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**How I got into the role**

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It was sheer fluke really. I was a qualified nurse and working in the operating theatres when I applied for a theatre course at Hammersmith Hospital and was told about a brand new theatre sterile supplies unit that needed a qualified nurse to manage it. There was no 'on call' working or working weekends and it paid better than nursing, so I was delighted to get the job.

I then worked my way up in various unit manager posts, finishing before I retired in a Band 8b position as assistant decontamination lead/sterile services manager at Southend Hospital.

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**What I did**

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The joy of the job for me was not knowing what I'd be doing next! The job was all about making sure that the surgical instruments in use in the hospital were clean and decontaminated for use on patients. New instruments would arrive and I had to learn quickly how to process them, working closely with colleagues on policies to ensure safe decontamination practices were followed by everyone in the hospital.

I also learned a lot about managing budgets, wrote business plans and developed business continuity plans in case we were unable to provide the service for any reason.

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**The best bits  
and challenges**

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I really enjoyed implementing new standards and guidance, and training my staff on how to reprocess devices. Every day I learned something new about new instruments and the machines that decontaminate them.

I made some wonderful friends and, most of all, enjoyed resolving problems and making sure our patients received a safe service.

The challenges came when voluntary groups raised money to buy pieces of equipment or a clinician brought a device home from a trip abroad, without being aware of the decontamination implications. With the best will in the world, it is not sensible to buy a piece of equipment which cannot be cleaned safely.

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**Life outside  
work**

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Through my work I was able to get involved in various working groups for my professional body locally, nationally and internationally. The job enabled me to travel to countries I would never have thought of visiting and I delivered lectures in Australia,

Hong Kong, South Africa, Ireland, Germany, Spain and Bulgaria.

Many former colleagues are now friends and I'm grateful for email as a great way of keeping in touch. Where we can, we book to stay in the same hotels for conferences and so on, and sometimes add on extra days to spend together exploring new countries.

My interests are as varied as my friends and I believe life is a continuing adventure. At the moment I'm trying to extend my culinary skills and having a go at writing stories for children.

### **What I'm doing now**

I was recently appointed chair of the Institute of Decontamination Sciences, a body made up of decontamination professionals, allied professions and clinical services to look at the challenges of safe healthcare provision.

The role is fixed for three years and I'm required to chair three pre-board meetings and three board meetings a year, produce reports and attend various working groups. My role is to represent the views of institute members locally, nationally and even internationally, so it's important to listen carefully, respect any concerns raised and delegate tasks to other directors who have particular expertise.

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**Top tips for others**

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It's important to acknowledge there's a lot to learn and always will be, and to understand the basics of procedures and everyday instrumentation before moving onto more complicated technical devices.

Ask questions, read books, research on the internet and be prepared to invest your time and energy into your chosen profession. It probably won't be standard 9 to 5, Monday to Friday kind of work; babies are born when they choose, accidents happen at inconvenient times and patients need safe surgery all the time.

For me, working in decontamination/sterile services was both a challenging and rewarding career choice. I can honestly say I'm glad I made the choice I did. I was never bored and there was, and is, still so much to learn.