

Real-life story - Sheila Roberts

Sheila has had a varied career in nursing, ultimately leading to her current role as immunisation lead. The wonderful thing about nursing, she says, is that you can change your career path without having to change your career.



Sheila Roberts Immunisation lead

Employer or university Hounslow and Richmond Community Healthcare NHS Trust (HRCH)

Salary range £30k-£40k

How I got into the role

I didn't like school very much so I didn't do well. At 16 I worked in an old people's home. Then, when aged 18, I was encouraged to apply for nurse training and trained as a state-enrolled nurse (SEN). I imagine the planned new nursing associate role will be similar and give people an opportunity to train to be a nurse by learning on the job through an apprenticeship leading to a foundation degree. After initial training I worked on the paediatric medical wards at my local hospital, and in 1995 was seconded to train as a registered nurse for sick children. On completion of this course, I worked in the Children's Outpatient Department and Day Care Unit. I enjoyed the health education side of the role, so moved between day care and public health in the community. After eight years I took a three-month sabbatical to care for some dear relatives at the end of their lives. I returned to my old role, but the experience of caring for sick people away from a hospital environment inspired me to look elsewhere, so I started work in a children's hospice. I stayed there for two-and-a-half years before returning to public health and my current position.

What I do

I work for HRCH and lead a team of bank nurses (temporary, flexible staff) who are trained in administering immunisations. We carry out immunisation programmes for school-age children, both as part of the national

childhood immunisation programme and in response to local outbreaks of diseases such as measles or meningitis. Any disease outbreak needs to be addressed before it becomes an epidemic. When there is an outbreak of a disease my team will be informed and sent directly to the schools to offer an urgent response. We will offer a vaccination to anyone who may need it to contain the illness. One of the issues with immunisation is that we have to immunise as many people as possible in a group who are linked to an outbreak (the herd) to protect the few people who can't have vaccinations.

When we are involved in a campaign I organise information for parents, vaccination dates, consent forms etc, and, if we are actually immunising, I collect the necessary stock of vaccine along with the appropriate paperwork required. I meet the team at the school and we vaccinate all of the students in attendance. This could be anything between 250 and 500 immunisations in a session. The role requires lots of knowledge, communication and a good sense of humour. Every young person needs to know why they are having the vaccine, as ultimately they are in control and need to agree to the vaccine being administered. Our conversation has to be pitched at the appropriate level to meet the needs and understanding of the child or young person.

Another large part of my role involves ensuring that all team members are competent to practise, checking that their training and development is up to date. I work very closely with the school nurse teams and health visitors. I could not fulfil my role without the fantastic administrative support that I receive.

Never be too proud to take a step back and look at life and work from someone else's perspective.

The best bits and challenges

I love the communication and education that the role involves. I enjoy and have fun talking to and helping young people to make informed decisions. This year was the first year we have administered the flu vaccine in schools. It was a delight working with the 5-7 year olds, and amazing to hear how much they knew and wanted to know.

There are challenges to this role, though. For example, sometimes I am told by a parent that what I am doing is wrong and I may even be told what articles I should read to support their view. I realise that immunisation is not compulsory, it is a choice. It's not me personally they are dissatisfied with, but the programme; everyone is allowed to have their opinion.

One of the things that I am most proud of is that, last year, together with four school nurse colleagues, I won a competition in our trust to make an innovative proposal. Our proposal was to develop an app for mobile phones to enable young people to contact their school nurse confidentially or find appropriate researched information to support their individual need, or both. We have had total control of its development which is currently waiting to be launched and we have written an article which has just gone for review prior to publication.

Career plans and top tips for others

If you're interested in following this career path, you need to qualify as a registered nurse, ideally have some experience in community nursing, school nursing or immunisation, and enjoy working with young people.

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