

Real-life story - Susie Singleton

Susie is a national expert in the surveillance and management of infections and communicable diseases and provides advice and support to a wide range of national organisations as well as local healthcare providers, service commissioners and public health teams.



Susie Singleton Senior specialist health protection and consultant nurse

Employer or university Public Health England

Salary range I'd rather not say

How I got into the role

I was very sporty when I was younger and originally wanted to go into remedial gymnastics. However, there was a three-year waiting list for that programme so I decided to train as a registered nurse first. Unfortunately the programme was no longer available at the end of the three years so I stayed in nursing.

My first nursing post was in sports injury and rheumatology. I then moved into orthopaedics and trauma and was a senior sister in a London teaching hospital in the emergency department. I took a secondment into infection control and “caught the bug.” I specialised in two areas: infection prevention and control; and management and counselling for HIV and AIDS. My next role was with the North Derbyshire Health Authority as an infection prevention and control manager after which I became a senior nurse in public health, completing a Master’s degree in health protection. That marked a turning point for me as I realised hospitals are not the centre of the universe and I wanted to focus on prevention and public health to keep people out of hospital.

What I do

I can be office based (at home) on some days, when I respond to requests for advice from organisations such

as health care providers, commissioners, local authorities or other employers either by email or on the telephone. This can involve signposting practitioners or managers to information, or providing clinical advice on the best precautions to take to deal with specific diseases. I can also be invited to go into hospitals or other care settings to provide support for infection outbreaks that are proving difficult to get under control. I may have to carry out investigations into incidents and infections to identify what has gone wrong and support changes in practice.

Other days, I have to get up at 5am to travel to London for meetings or can be designing or supporting study days on the latest developments in infection prevention and control, and health protection. I also get calls about how to deal with unusual diseases such as Ebola to ensure safe procedures are in place.

If theory is our right foot and experience is our left, to move forward we must have both otherwise we just go round in circles.

The best bits and challenges

The things I most enjoy about my role are the unpredictability and having to face new challenges every day, which keeps me on my toes. I am constantly learning new things about human behaviour as well as gaining new clinical and scientific knowledge. I have had some exciting opportunities; for example, I was invited to attend an international conference on Ebola to represent UK nursing, which gave me the chance to put nursing on the map.

The main challenge is that my role requires input from so many partners and sub-groups that it is difficult to keep up to date with who is doing what. Different organisations have different priorities and there are financial constraints that make it difficult to keep things joined up. People can have a narrow view of infection control as just being about hand washing, but it is so much bigger and more specialised than that, involving, for example, looking at water systems and equipment.

Life outside work

I have quite flexible working arrangements as I am home-based. However, bugs do not fit into convenient timetables and I can find it difficult to switch off as I enjoy reading anything and everything to keep up to date.

I enjoy swimming, walking and am involved in sports coaching. I have to do more gentle sports these days after breaking my kneecap. I did get a different perspective and better understanding of disability when I had my injury which I believe has helped me in my role.

Career plans and top tips for others

I have been invited to become a member of the International Support Team who are the “disease detectives” involved in setting up teams to be deployed to tackle known disease outbreaks. I have the opportunity to work with the World Health Organization.

I would like to complete a PhD at some point but I am not sure if I will be able to fit it in.

There are a multitude of opportunities, and you need to develop your confidence and be ready to put yourself

forward. You are never alone and there are always people around willing to help with your decisions. Believe you can do it and if you don't have the expertise at the beginning of a role, you can develop it.

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