

"It's a real privilege to hear the details of a person's life and psychiatry, more than any other medical specialty, offers this opportunity."

Dr Grace Ofori-Attah is a higher specialty trainee, ST6 in general psychiatry. She works for the Camden Specialist Drug Service, within Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust and also for the Amy Winehouse Foundation, a charity which works to prevent the effects of drug and alcohol misuse in young people. Dr Ofori-Attah is also an honorary clinical lecturer at University College London.

Dr Grace Ofori-Attah

Higher specialty trainee, ST6 in general psychiatry

Employer or university

Camden Specialist Drug Service



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**How I got into
the role**

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I've always been fascinated by people's behaviour and why we make the decisions that we do. I decided to apply for medicine at Cambridge University, with psychiatry in my mind as a possible

career. As well as science A levels I also took English. The study of literature often involves an understanding of people's thoughts, emotions and behaviour.

While at Cambridge University I completed a dissertation on persistent violent offending, looking at prison populations in America. After completing my pre-clinical training at Cambridge I transferred to Oxford University for the clinical training. This included a two-month placement in psychiatry.

I really enjoyed this placement, and was encouraged to pursue psychiatry by the supportive consultants I met. I really enjoyed listening to patients and hearing them talk about their childhoods and early family relationships. I was starting to look for clues concerning the origins of their illness, be they genetic or environmental.

My foundation programme in the South Thames Foundation School included one general and one child and adolescent psychiatry rotation in each year of the two year programme. I was fortunate once again to have supportive consultants who encouraged me to experience every aspect of the specialty and to attend relevant conferences and study days. I also enjoyed a fascinating placement in a paediatric neuropsychiatry clinic.

Once I had completed foundation training [1] I commenced core training in psychiatry, which takes three years. I gained comprehensive experience of general, old age, child and adolescent, substance misuse and liaison psychiatry via six different six-month placements. I was also an honorary research associate at the Institute of Psychiatry.

During core training I developed an interest in helping people with problems concerning substance misuse and began volunteering with the Amy Winehouse Foundation. They run alcohol and drug education programmes in schools for 11-18 year olds where addicts in recovery talk to young people about their addictions. I could see that preventative programmes could offer the opportunity to change people's lives for the better.

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What I do

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I am now in the third and final year of my higher specialist training in general psychiatry. You're given a day a week to develop your special interest at this stage of your training, which has enabled me to stay at the Amy Winehouse Foundation. An interesting part of this work has been working on a national prevalence study, to look at patterns of substance use in 11-18 year olds. I took a year out of my training to concentrate on this work.

My role at the Amy Winehouse Foundation also involves advising the staff on all aspects of the project, and I occasionally also go into schools to deliver workshops with students and teachers.

The higher training programme has given me extensive experience of the range of conditions treated in psychiatry. I've worked on an acute assessment ward dealing with new admissions and I also worked in the home treatment team where I developed treatment plans for patients with psychosis, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and severe depression.

The treatment I give is a mixture of medication and talking therapies such as cognitive behavioural therapy [2] (CBT). Patients often say that they find the opportunity to talk over their mental health issues with someone who listens non-judgementally is often the thing that helps them the most. We also work with a number of homeless people, who often have no-one at all to talk to in their day-to-day life.

In my present job at the South Camden Drug Service I run outpatients clinics most days of the week, and see patients with substance misuse problems for appointments which last anything from 15 to 45 minutes.

I also deliver occasional lectures on psychiatry to medical students at University College London.

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The best bits and challenges

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What I enjoy most about psychiatry is the opportunity it provides to talk to people and to hear their stories. It's a real privilege to hear the details of a person's life and psychiatry, more than any other medical specialty, offers this opportunity.

My job can be very rewarding. In my current job I frequently work with homeless people struggling with addiction. Helping them start to manage their addiction and reintegrate into society, whether it's through developing relationships or finding accommodation, is challenging and very rewarding. I've also enjoyed having contact with students and teachers in schools as part of my work with the Amy Winehouse Foundation.

One of the main challenges in psychiatry is the sheer volume of patients. Resources are stretched, meaning there are often insufficient nurses, doctors and suitable beds.

Often my patients are psychotic or suicidal. They're usually at the most difficult point in their lives. It's important for me to engage with all my patients, which can be emotional at times.

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Life outside work

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A supportive network of family and friends helps me to cope with the demands of my job. I make the most of living in London, and enjoy going to art galleries and the theatre in my spare time.

I've always loved creative writing and one of my main interests nowadays is screen-writing. I'm currently writing a drama series which is partly based on some of my experiences as a junior doctor.

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**Career plans
and top tips for
others**

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I'm now entering my final year of higher specialist training in general psychiatry, leading to my CCT [3]. I'll soon be applying for consultant posts, probably in the substance misuse field. I'm also very interested in the development of psychosis in young adults.

Top tips

- after medical school try to find rotations in psychiatry as part of your foundation programme
- talk to a psychiatrist – medical schools and foundation programmes sometimes offer mentoring schemes to facilitate this
- look for psychiatry in other spheres of life – for example literature and the arts - to develop and broaden your knowledge of the specialty

Source URL:<https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/explore-roles/doctors/roles-doctors/psychiatry/general-psychiatry/real-life-story-dr-grace-ofori-attah>

Links

[1] https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/glossary#Foundation_training

[2] https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/glossary#Cognitive_behavioural_therapy

[3] <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/glossary#CCT>