

Real-life story - Helen Bethell

Helen always loved science and volunteered in various caring roles when she was at university. A lecture from a [genetics \[1\]](#) counsellor in the first year of her degree helped her decide on a career as a genetic counsellor herself.

Helen Bethell

Genetic counsellor

Employer or university

Teesside Genetics Service

Salary range

£30k-£40k

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How I got into the role

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Ever since I was young, I've had a love for science and did well in the [genetics \[1\]](#) module of my biology A-level. But when we had a lecture from a local [genetics \[1\]](#) counsellor during the first year of my biomedical science degree, I knew instantly it was the career I wanted to pursue! I changed my specialism to [genetics \[1\]](#) and embraced as many volunteer opportunities the university offered. I did a short placement at the Northern Genetic Service in a gap year before starting my MSc genetic counselling course.

After finishing my MSc I completed a 2 year trainee post at the Northern Genetic Service. Unfortunately I was unsuccessful in securing a permanent position and so I trained as a

teacher and taught science in a secondary school before returning to work as a genetic counsellor part time in 2011.

What I do

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I typically work from 9.30am to 5.30pm and spend about a third of my time preparing and carrying out clinics, including weekly clinics where I'm based, home visits and clinics at other hospitals in the region. My role is all about supporting patients to make an informed decision, rather than telling them what they should do.

The rest of my time is taken up with administration, reading and research work, attending meetings, and telephone consultations with patients.

I also do some teaching, either for medical students or students on the MSc [genomics](#) [2] programme.

The best bits and challenges

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The best bit of my job is the satisfaction that comes from helping patients come to a truly informed decision. It is also lovely to be able to give good news, for example when I can inform a patient they will not develop or pass on the genetic conditions they've seen affect their relatives. It's a privilege to be able to work in such a role.

The most obvious challenge comes when the reverse happens, and I'm required to break bad news to patients and families. Often this may be when I've spent a considerable amount of time counselling patients and learning about their lives and relationships with their family members. Patients may also believe they are eligible for testing or screening when they're not, which can make for challenging clinic sessions.

It can be emotionally draining, but it's got easier as I've become more experienced in the role.

Life outside work

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I've always loved volunteering and care work. I volunteered for several charity projects in welfare roles and supporting vulnerable people at university and I think it really helped me secure my place on the MSc course.

My current hobbies are running and sewing which give me an outlet for some of the more difficult scenarios I encounter at work.

And I'm now mum to two young children who keep me busy on my days 'off' and help me keep a healthy work-life balance!

Career plans and top tips for others

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I am fascinated by the developments happening within genomic medicine and keen to pursue this interest from a clinical perspective, by means of helping to interpret uncertain results. I am also keen to work towards a Principal Genetic Counsellors role, as well as exploring the possibility of management training.

This is a competitive field to get into, but the best piece of advice I can give is don't be put off by others. A career in genetic counselling involves much more than just qualifications and it's important to demonstrate that in any applications. Contact your local genetic service and ask to talk to their genetic counsellor about the skills and qualifications the job requires. They may even be able to meet you in person or offer you a placement.

To do this job, it's important to be patient, caring and empathetic.

Source URL:<https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/explore-roles/healthcare-science/roles-healthcare-science/life-sciences/genomic-counselling/real-life-story-helen-bethell>

Links

[1] <https://www.healthcareers.nhs.uk/glossary#Genetics> [2]
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