

“The direct patient care we provide can be the moment that positively changes a person’s life forever. It can be such a humbling experience.”

Annie started her career as a healthcare support worker before becoming a mental health nurse which she has been doing for 20 years.

Dr Annie Cox

Consultant nurse and approved clinician

Employer or university

Derbyshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust



How I got into the role

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My NHS career started as a healthcare support worker on a children’s ward at local acute hospital. Children would generally be admitted for physical health concerns but some children were admitted for self-harming or suicidal thoughts. I wanted to understand what could be done to help them and families.

Communication has always been one of my strengths and it helped me form relationships with children and their families. My employer encouraged me to train as a nurse and with my experience as a support worker, gave me the confidence to apply.

Once qualified I went on rotation. It started at one of the last open asylums in Staffordshire. I then started working in a prison which really strengthened my physical health skills. I learned ear syringing, suturing, taking ECGs and qualified as a Hepatitis and HIV counsellor meaning I could support prisoners during their testing.

It was this experience that helped me in applying for agency work in a 'Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). This was the start of career in CAMHS which I have now been working in for over 20 years.

I am really passionate about child and adolescent mental health. I am sure I will stay working with children and families until I retire. It's such a fulfilling role. There's no greater feeling than being able to fundamentally change a child's or family's life for the better.

What I do

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I am a consultant nurse which means I am a clinical leader. My training and experience over many years means I am considered an expert in child and adolescent mental health and working with children and families.

My role as a consultant nurse, means I am a clinical expert, teacher, leader and researcher. These four areas of practice means that my role is full of variety, which I love about my role.

In any week, I could be planning care for children who have been admitted to the ward, presenting at conferences, leading networks for consultant nurses and or writing academic papers on research I have conducted.

The best bits and challenges

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The children and families I meet and the colleagues I work with are the best thing about my job.

To understand what is happening for a child and family and how we can help them is important to me. The variety and complexity of my role means I am positively challenged every day. I am lucky to have so much job satisfaction.

I am honoured to be able to work with other consultant nurses across the country. Our work has real impact on our services and people's lives. It's very exciting to know that my experience and knowledge, alongside that of my colleagues, truly makes a difference to families nationally and locally.

I have also been supported to undertake my doctorate in mental health nursing (Health and Social Care Practice). My research skills have hugely improved because during the completion of the qualification, allowing me to make positive change to children's lives. I used to think that research was undertaken by 'other' people but now realise nurses at all levels do research.

Of course, there have been challenges. Getting into Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) used to be very hard. But the time I spent working for an agency in a CAMHS in-patient ward, gave me the experience to apply CAMHS and be successful in a community role.

Thankfully CAMHS has changed a lot since then. Nurses and other professions are now welcomed without experience. We have fantastic 'on the job' training and have developed careers for a range of healthcare professionals.

Top tips

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Mental health nursing offers a rich and varied career. There are so many service areas to explore. It means supporting people in their lives when they are at their most vulnerable or most distressed. Having a wealth of skills to support people in these times is a privilege. The direct patient care we provide means we can positively change a person's life forever. It can be such a humbling experience.

The opportunities to extend your skill base in evidenced based therapies, advanced practice or in research are plentiful in mental health nursing. There are so many opportunities available to mental health nurses and every day is different, which makes it a very exciting job to be in.

It is a fascinating and fast paced role that always keeps you moving but enables you to meet the most inspiring people every week.

Career plans

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I am now an approved/responsible clinician, which is one of the new roles brought out in the Mental Health Act in the 2007 review. This means I am on a national register of clinicians who can:

- show an understanding of law
- assess and treat mental health difficulties
- work as part of the multi-disciplinary team
- lead people and services
- ensure children are treated with dignity, equality and respect
- be responsible for the care of children detained under the Mental Health Act

I am looking forward to this new challenge and developing further.

I am also keen to undertake more research and write academic papers. I want to help other nurses feel confident in getting involved in research and learn the skills to change practice for themselves.

I never believed that I would be a published author, but my career in mental health nursing has given me this opportunity. I have so much more I want to achieve, and I am excited at the prospect.

Wherever my career takes me, I know that the core skills of mental health nursing will be with me and will continue to be professional glue that positively influences my work healthcare.

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