

Transcript of interview with Dr. Alex Bailey
Consultant Psychiatrist, City of Westminster

Subject: Working in a Community Health Team

WHAT DOES YOUR WORK INVOLVE?

I work in the Community Mental Health Team and we cover the whole of the Borough of Westminster. It's a really big patch. About 25 of us work in the team and at any one time we will be working with about 400 people in the community. We spend most of our time listening to people where they live, where they are - whether that is in their own homes or in care homes. We work with a really wide range of problems and spend a lot of time working with people with dementia for example, but we also help people with problems such as depression, schizophrenia or personality disorders. It's a wide range of mental illness that we deal with.

TELL US ABOUT A TYPICAL DAY?

There's definitely no typical day. Each day is very, very different. There will always be a clinical component to the day and that will usually be some kind of team meeting. We might be talking about a new assessment that someone in the team has done, or once a week we get together to discuss complex cases, because often we find that it's very difficult to carry on with this stuff by yourself; you need input from all the different people in the team to be able to come to some sort of decision. So we do a lot of clinical stuff in that respect.

I will see patients, but not as many as I wish I could because I am a consultant in the true sense of the word and often consult with the other staff and offer them advice on how to manage difficult cases.

I spend a lot of time teaching and training, so much of my day will be taken up with supervision of trainees and training medical students or other staff members, and then I might be doing things like going out on a mental health assessment for example; what is commonly known as "sectioning". I might go out and have to decide if someone needs to be detained in hospital and that can be quite challenging. I also do a lot of management stuff as well, which at first sounded as dull as ditch water, but it can be quite exciting and rewarding.

WHO WORKS IN THE TEAM?

Lots of people; like I said it's a big team, about 25 of us. I lead the team, but I am supported by the trainees and speciality doctors and we have psychology colleagues, which brings a nice aspect to the work. We also have nurses, occupational therapists, social workers, support workers and administrators, so a diverse group. We are truly multi-professional, which is great.

IS DEMAND FOR YOUR SPECIALITY INCREASING?

It definitely is, which can feel a bit daunting at times because, as you know, there aren't many more resources coming in to the NHS at the moment. However, people are definitely getting older and I think that by 2050 we will probably have twice the number of people over the age of 65 that we have now. It's a daunting prospect, but equally there are lots of opportunities and it's quite exciting.

IS IT CHALLENGING WORK?

Very, very challenging. The things that make it challenging are the things that make it rewarding as well. I've talked about how diverse it can be and sometimes that it can be a bit overwhelming as you have to shift from doing one thing to something completely different at the drop of a hat. That can be quite tiring both physically and

emotionally, but I'm lucky because the team is hugely strong in terms of pulling together and we make sure that we are always talking about the difficult things we have to deal with in a very open way; it really helps to share some of the load.

WHO WOULD BEST SUIT A CAREER IN ELDERLY PERSON PSYCHIATRY?

Someone likes a good old natter. I think you have to like talking to people because whether you are talking to patients, to relatives, to members of the team or to external organisation that we work with, you are always talking and that can be a bit exhausting, but that's what you need to do. You need to like talking in order to build relationships; they are the most important things.

WHAT MOST ATTRACTED YOU TO THIS CAREER?

Well I definitely like a good natter, which doesn't hurt at all, but I think the other thing is that when I was training I felt that older people were being given a bit of a raw deal, particularly in hospitals. I often felt they were shoved into wards, not really spoken to that much and generally left there. Maybe this was a perception on my part rather than actually how it is now. Things have changed. What I wanted to do was to talk to them when I was on the wards and I found that I would probably spend far more time talking to them than getting on with the things my consultants wanted me to do... But it exploded the world for me in terms of how to form relationships, which I found was as helpful as the medical interventions.

ARE THERE DOWNSIDES TO THE JOB?

I think I can honestly say there are not that many. However, being very tiring is definitely the biggest one. I get home and I am pretty exhausted, although I often feel uplifted at the same time - it's an unusual combination. Paperwork is the bugbear of the modern NHS unfortunately, and this team is no different, so you have to be very bound up in your work to make sure that it (the paperwork) doesn't overtake all the clinical work, which is fundamentally what we are here to do. Paperwork and being shattered by the end of the day I would say are the two downsides.

IS IT WELL PAID?

It is well paid. I am on a consultant's salary, which I consider to be pretty well paid and I get extra sessions because I take on a management role, which is something that I never anticipated doing. So I get my full time consultant post, but also a bit of additional salary for doing the management activities.

HOW SHOULD SOMEONE FIND OUT IF THIS SPECIALITY IS FOR THEM?

Because you often don't get much exposure to mental health when you are in your undergraduate years I think the most important thing to do for anyone who is interested is to go and talk to an Old Age Psychiatrist. Phone up your local friendly Old Age Psychiatrist and ask if you can have a chat with them. Or, if you've got time, go and shadow them for a bit; that will help you to understand what the job is all about. The other thing to do is to look at the Royal College of Psychiatry website because they are really good at encouraging trainees and students to join them and you can get lots of discounts and things like that so it's definitely worth a look as well

IS THE SPECIALITY DIFFERENT TO ITS IMAGE?

I don't think I really knew that old age psychiatry existed when I was at medical school. I mean, I did a psychiatry placement and I might have done a placement with an Old Age Psychiatrist, but I think the whole idea of it being a separate speciality passed me by and it wasn't until I got into psychiatry training that it became an obvious option for me. Yes, it is different when you are at medical school; you see a

psychiatrist as being a little bit eccentric or a bit fusty and that's not the case at all. It's actually a dynamic speciality; cutting edge in terms of integrated working, which the NHS is moving to. It feels much faster paced and much more rewarding than I might have thought it was when I was training.

WILL YOU STAY IN THIS TYPE OF WORK?

Undoubtedly. I don't think I could do anything else now. I'm a complete convert. I might want to move into a different area in a few years - whether that's In Patients, or working in liaison psychiatry, which is quite exciting as well, but working with older people I will definitely never leave that.