

Phoebe Symons

Dietetic Apprentice



My route into Dietetics

It took me quite a while to find dietetics as a potential career option. I grew up wanting to go into medicine, always having a passion for healthcare and helping people however I became unwell during my A-levels and could only continue to study Maths whilst I was out of college. I realised the high stress of studying medicine wasn't going to be feasible for me so completed a BTEC in Health and Social care with the intention of studying Nursing instead. I spent 3 days in university before realising that I was not ready for a full time university course and living away from family so came back home. I spent 2 years working in a coffee shop deciding what I wanted to do going forward before deciding healthcare was definitely the thing I was passionate about!

I got a job as a ward clerk to get my foot in the door of the NHS and give me a chance to gain some healthcare experience and see how different healthcare professionals work. That was when I was first introduced to the role of a dietetic assistant and spent some time shadowing them to see what they do and decided that was what I wanted to do.

A closer look at my current role

I'm currently working as an Apprentice Dietitian at Bristol Royal Infirmary and studying my degree remotely through Teesside University. My work role is split between Oncology and Upper GI surgery teams. I started my apprenticeship 16 months ago and before starting the degree, I worked at the BRI as a dietetic assistant for 1.5 years in the Food Policy and Cystic Fibrosis teams.

I work 4 days a week within the hospital and 1 day a week attending university remotely. Due to being split across several teams, each day looks very different. Monday mornings are my oncology outpatient clinic where I will see 3-4 patients independently with a supervision session with the dietitian afterwards to review outcomes for patients. Monday afternoons are clinic admin. Wednesday mornings are clinic prep for next week and adhoc oral nutritional supplement review calls for patients. Wednesday afternoons I work in Bone Marrow Transplant reviewing inpatients who are receiving stem cell transplants, Thursday's I see inpatient oncology inpatients and Fridays I work on the Upper GI surgery ward reviewing patients for oral nutritional support or joint reviews with the senior dietitian for patients with tube feeding.

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How does mental health fit with your goals?

My own personal mental health difficulties have given me a passion for mental health dietetics and being able to empathise with patients and help others. You learn a lot about what it means to be a good health professional when you have been on the receiving end of both good and bad practice and being able to apply that in your own clinical practice and striving to give better care is invaluable. I also have an interest in sports nutrition and dietetics and have been doing my own research into eating disorders within athletes and RED-S (relative energy deficiency in sport) which is something I am interested in pursuing further and learning more about. I have spent time shadowing dietitians at a local mental health trust to understand more about what is involved in mental health dietetics and solidify the decision that I have a passion in mental health.

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The thing I'm most proud of

The thing I am most proud of is how much my confidence and resilience has grown both within my work and also in my personal life. I had lost a lot of confidence when I was unwell especially as I wasn't able to pursue previous career ambitions. However learning and studying whilst in the workplace and getting hands-on experience has enabled my confidence to grow much more. I can now confidently teach a group of 20-30 nursing staff on our nutrition care pathway. Last year in our Trust's apprenticeship awards, I was voted highly commended, which I am very proud of.

What advice would you offer to someone considering training via the Apprenticeship route?

I believe that apprenticeships are such a great way of studying as you get so much experience from your workplace. From confidence in speaking with service users and other health care professionals to knowledge of local policies, medical jargon, and working closely with dietitians to develop your clinical knowledge. I was lucky to be able to start the apprenticeship within my current workplace which meant I didn't need to relocate and could stay close to family and friends.

The apprenticeship is hard work, as you are completing an undergraduate degree in dietetics in 3 years whilst still working 4 days a week, so evenings and weekends will be spent studying and revising. Therefore managing a work/life balance is really important and will need thought especially if you have caring responsibilities/young family. As I had not studied at university previously, I found the university skills like referencing, writing essays and critical analysis much harder to pick up so would advise brushing up on these skills if you have not previously done a degree. There is a vast range of ages and experience in my apprenticeship cohort so don't feel put off, you're sure to have people in similar experiences as yourself.