

Emily Walters

Consultant Dietitian



Tell us about your current role

I currently have a 'portfolio career' and practise as a consultant dietitian with particular interests in identification and management of malnutrition as well as dementia care. A portfolio career means I can choose where I work and get to do things I really enjoy! This includes projects and research, lecturing and writing as well as providing pre-registration dietetic placements. I am also a Director for the BDA and volunteer with the ACBS and BAPEN. I qualified over 30 years ago and initially worked as a graduate dietitian covering various wards and clinics for 18 months. I was then offered a role as a clinical research dietitian in nutrition support for two years before moving on to specialise in Burns and Plastics. Although I really enjoyed this work a desire to move out of London took me Southampton where I led the dietetic service for the Regional Cancer Centre. In 2005 I was appointed as Chief Dietitian and alongside my clinical work in cancer had the opportunity to increase my involvement in research. After a decade in this role, I left to take up an NIHR Clinical Academic Fellowship in dementia care. This supported me to complete my PhD in family carer experiences of eating and appetite in dementia. My interest in dementia care has continued through into my current portfolio of work and complements my interests in malnutrition.

So how does a nutrition support dietitian working in cancer end up with an interest in dementia?

If I'm honest mental health was not an area I had been interested in and I didn't have great experiences of this during my training. I was therefore surprised to become so interested in dementia care. When working with cancer patients I recognised the important role of family members in helping to deliver nutritional care. I wanted to better understand this so when an opportunity to research and explore family carer experiences in dementia care arose I took a leap of faith! To my surprise there was a lot of knowledge and expertise which was transferable from cancer and palliative care to dementia care. I unexpectedly found I really enjoyed working with people impacted by dementia. Dietitians have so much to offer this group who generally have very limited information and support around nutrition and diet. There is real scope to positively affect quality of life through appropriate nutritional advice and support for people living with dementia and their families.

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The thing I'm most proud of

Becoming a BDA director and chairing the new Professional Committee provides me with an amazing opportunity to contribute to discussions and decisions which help to shape the organisation and the profession. It's a real privilege to have this role if a little daunting at times! Completing my PhD is one of my biggest achievements to date particularly as I would not consider myself particularly academic. I feel proud to have achieved this and give people impacted by dementia a voice every time I share my findings.

What advice would you offer to someone considering undertaking doctorate study?

I would encourage anyone thinking about doing a PhD to be clear why they want to do one. I would ask yourself; What is my career goal? Will a PhD help me get there? What will it add? Is it needed?

I would talk to others who have been through the process and suggest developing a support network and/or finding a mentor – just getting to the point of starting a PhD can sometimes be challenging. [Click here for a link to wider networks you might find helpful.](#)

You also need to think about the different funding routes. Are you going to self-fund? Would you consider applying for funded fellowships on specific topics advertised through universities? Are you interested in an NIHR clinical academic fellowship? Would you consider sponsorship from organisations, companies, charities?

Other things to consider: Do you want a full or part time PhD? Have you considered the financial implications? Could you live on a PhD stipend? Would you move for the right PhD? What will happen to your substantive post if you do a full or part-time PhD? Is your current employer supportive of your desire to pursue a PhD? Is it the right time in your life to be taking on a PhD? Thinking about these sorts of questions will help shape your ideas about the sort of PhD opportunity you are looking for.

A good first step is an NIHR pre-doctoral fellowship (PCAF). This gives you time and space to prepare for PhD fellowship applications. NIHR fellowships are great but very competitive. [Click here for a discussion about these.](#)

If you are flexible in the topic you want to study consider searching these websites to find PhD opportunities:

- [PhD Portal](#)
- [Find a PhD](#)

Finally, [click here for some BDA information about PhDs and research careers.](#)

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