

Career Opportunities in Health Psychology

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This rapidly developing field of health psychology offers a growing number of job opportunities, research careers and new career paths which are beginning to be mapped by pioneer practitioners of health psychology.

Health psychology is still predominantly a research field in the UK. Research questions address the great variety of ways in which psychology factors affect health and illness. Many health psychologists focus on the complex interactions of psychology and physiology in the causation and course of conditions such as cardiovascular disease. Other health psychologists with interests in social psychology and interpersonal communication apply these interests to doctor-patient communication with a view to improving information transfer and doctors' understanding of patients' needs. Coping strategies for dealing with the many health related challenges are of interest to health psychologists working, for example, with patients who have a chronic illness or are in pain, with women in childbirth, or with people who are bereaved. Health psychologists are increasingly involved in evaluating treatment interventions including technological innovations such as new insulin delivery systems for people with diabetes. With the recent reorganisation of the National Health Service and the new demands on general practitioners and hospitals to audit the outcomes of medical care, health psychologists are being asked to provide methods and measures of psychological outcomes of treatment including measures of patient satisfaction and quality of life.

Although many clinical psychologists are interested in health psychology and some work predominantly within the field of health psychology, the domains of clinical and health psychology are separate, though overlapping, disciplinary areas. Clinical psychologists are primarily concerned with the assessment and treatment of people with psychological disorders, major mental illness, neuropsychological problems or learning difficulties. Their focus is on psychopathology, its assessment and treatment. Health psychologists, on the other hand, are primarily concerned with patients who are psychologically healthy but who are trying to prevent or cope with physical illness. The focus of health psychologists may be on the individual patient and his or her coping strategies, but also may focus on the knowledge, beliefs and behaviour of health care professionals, the health care service provided, health education programmes, and public health policy issues.

As research in health psychology has mushroomed in the past decade in the UK, the applications of the research findings have required the active involvement of practitioners. Often the doctors, nurses and other

clinicians are able to apply the findings of health psychology directly. However, where implementation of findings has needed a psychologist, the psychologists called upon have tended to be clinical psychologists who have a well established role within the National Health Service, even though that role has been allied mainly with psychiatry rather than with general medicine. Many clinical psychologists have welcomed the extension of their role to embrace general medicine. However, posts are now being created for psychologists which involve specialised applications of psychology within fields of medicine such as renal medicine or diabetes for which a health psychologist experienced in the particular field of medicine may be the best qualified applicant.

There are now several practitioner posts for health psychologists in the UK. These have been created in the National Health Service Trust hospitals where there is increasing recognition of the value of health psychology in economic as well as human terms. If health psychologists can help people with diabetes keep their blood glucose levels well controlled, can help surgical patients recover more quickly and so on, then complications of diabetes should be reduced and hospital stays should be shorter with dramatic reductions in costs incurred. In addition to practitioner posts, Regional Health Authorities may employ health psychologists to be involved in planning services and I am aware of one such post where a health psychologist has been appointed. Thus, although the major opportunities for health psychologists are in research and teaching posts, there are some opportunities for clinical work and in the planning of clinical services and those opportunities are likely to expand rapidly.

Research opportunities in health psychology are more widespread than in most other areas of psychology. Not only are health psychologists able to apply for funding to the research councils in the UK, the National Institutes of Health in the USA fund applications on their merit regardless of country of origin. Funding is available from international bodies such as the World Health Organisation and the European Commission, from charitable bodies such as the British Diabetic Association and the British Heart Foundation and from industry, with pharmaceutical companies being major sources of funding.

School leavers interested in a career in health psychology should seek a place on an undergraduate degree course in psychology. Applicants should have GCSE in Maths and three A levels or their equivalent are likely to be required. A wide variety of A level subjects in arts or sciences are acceptable. Standards vary somewhat; in my department, grades of BBC are requested. We encourage mature applicants, including those with non-standard qualifications, and recognise the value of their varied employment and family experiences.

The undergraduate course at Royal Holloway offers introductory lectures in health psychology during the first two years. An optional course specialising in health psychology is available in the third year. Many of the undergraduate research projects are in areas of health

psychology. Topics I have supervised in the last couple of years include: the effects of computers in the consultation; evaluation of a shared care card in diabetes care; the effects of stress on blood glucose levels in people with brittle diabetes; assessment of quality of life in adolescents with diabetes; measurement of psychological outcomes in general practice. Graduates usually need a first or upper second class degree to go on to undertake PhD research which is the usual route for those who seek an academic research career, teaching in a university psychology department and undertaking their own programmes of research.

Recently, several MSc courses in health psychology have

been set up. They vary considerably in what they expect from students and in what they offer. The University of London has a part time course jointly organised by health psychologists at the United Medical and Dental Schools of Guy's and St Thomas's Hospitals, Middlesex and University College Hospitals, and the Royal Free. Applicants for this course need a first degree in psychology. Other MSc courses in health psychology have less rigorous entrance criteria. Courses at City University, Middlesex University and Surrey University welcome applicants with first degrees in subjects other than psychology and may require applicants to have clinical experience of some kind. Some courses offer a Diploma option of shorter duration for which a research project and

thesis is not required. Graduates in psychology seeking an MSc in health psychology would be best catered for with a course that is designed for psychology graduates only (currently available at the University of London) rather than a course that requires no prior qualification in psychology. MSc courses in health psychology which do not require a first degree in psychology offer the opportunity of studying health psychology to nurses, physiotherapists, speech therapists and other health care professionals.

School leavers seeking a degree course in psychology should consult the prospectuses of psychology departments to determine whether and to what extent health psychology is taught to undergraduates. Those seeking PhD opportunities should approach individual members of staff whose research spans areas of interest and/or look out for advertised studentship grants in departments where health psychology is an active area of research. Further details of the MSc courses are available in an article written by teachers on the four courses available, Weinman, Edelman, Marks and Watts (1989). For further information about health psychology the reader is referred to Bennett, Weinman and Spurgeon (Eds) (1990) and to the journals, *Psychology* and

Careers for Women VOCATIONAL GUIDANCE ASSESSMENTS

Careers for Women offers assessments in member schools but also holds sessions in the London office during school holidays.

The service is for students between the ages of fifteen and eighteen and aims to help them assess more clearly their own potential and raise awareness of education and career possibilities.

The next session is on

Monday 5 April 1993

and would be suitable for girls about to go into the GCSE year or the sixth form.

Students take aptitude tests and interest profiles, followed by an in-depth interview. All this is used to produce a careers report including some specific recommendations from which the student and her parents can work.

The fee is £149.23 (inc VAT) reduced to £112.80 for members of the Parent Membership Scheme.

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Health and Health Psychology and to the British Journal of Clinical Psychology which now includes a separate section on health psychology.

References

Bennett, P., Weinman, J. and Spurgeon, P. (Eds) (1990) *Current Developments in Health Psychology*. London: Harwood Academic Press.

Weinman, J., Edelman, R., Marks, D. and Watts, M. (1989) *Training in Health Psychology: an overview of MSc courses in the UK*. Health Psychology Update, 3, 12-17.

Editor's note - The articles mentioned are in professional journals so may be rather too advanced for school leavers but those with more preliminary knowledge of psychology will find them very interesting.

British Psychological Society, St Andrew's House, 48 Princess Road East, Leicester LE1 7DR.

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Women Returners' Network

Women returning to employment are expected to make up 4 out of every 5 new entrants to the labour market during the 1990s.

The Women Returners' Network aims to facilitate women's re-entry into education, training and employment. WRN works with industry, commerce, training and educational organisations in the public and private sectors. They point out that:

- * Nearly half our workforce is female
- * Over 12 million women are in employment
- * Two-thirds of them are married
- * 8 million married women work (1 in 3 of all workers is a married woman)
- * 8 out of 10 women who take a career break return to work within 5 years.

The Women Returners' Network is realistic about the fact that opportunities for employment will change with changes in the economy, but encourage women to take every opportunity to train and update their qualifications, as the indications are that the long term shortage of skilled people will remain. The latest edition of their 'Returning to Work' Directory is due to be published shortly.

WRN can be contacted at Euston House, 81-103 Euston Street, London NW1 2ET.



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The Church of England

The vote at the General Synod of the Church of England gained the requisite two thirds majority in all three Houses at their November meeting for allowing women to be considered for ordination to the priesthood. The measure still has to be approved by parliament but it is expected that the first women will be ordained to the priesthood in July 1994 in this part of the Anglican Communion. The first women priests will be from those women who have already been ordained deacon.

Women who feel they have a vocation to the ordained ministry of any religion should start by talking to the minister of their own congregation whose recommendation they will need.

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