

A year in the life of a teaching fellow

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I qualified from Edinburgh University in 1998 and over the last ten years have pursued a career in hospital medicine. Like many other junior doctors I enjoyed teaching and found this aspect of my job very rewarding. After obtaining a training number in Respiratory Medicine in 2003 I continued along the specialist registrar pathway. I had never been particularly interested in spending time doing research but teaching was an area I was very keen to pursue further. Like many specialist registrars teaching was part of my weekly routine but I had never really had any formal training in being a teacher. I was keen to explore 'learning' and develop skills in medical education generally.

A year out of programme for a SpR

After four years as a SpR I decided it was time to explore medical education. I found an advertisement in the BMJ looking for a "teaching fellow" at Darlington and Bishop Auckland hospitals and within a few months I was interviewed and appointed. It all sounds very straightforward however a lot of organisation was needed to obtain time away from my SpR training programme. Eventually the regional Specialist Training Committee (STC) gave their approval and I was on my way. I started in August 2006 and the appointment was for twelve months. I had no idea about the structure of Newcastle medical undergraduate curriculum. Like many other SpRs I had taught medical students over the years under the headings of FOCP, CIDR and HBP but had no understanding of how these courses were structured. As far as I was concerned it was only what I was teaching that was important. Nevertheless I was quickly indoctrinated by the undergraduate education team - I received lever arch files on the curriculum and gained a lot of practical advice from members of the team who had many years of experience. Their help and guidance throughout the year was brilliant, and I certainly felt part of a team that cared and was dedicated to medical education.

What the job involved

My working week was divided into 10 sessions with 6 in education and 4 clinical sessions. My clinical work involved bronchoscopy, clinics and on call for general medicine. However the main focus of the week was education, and the flexibility of the respiratory department allowed things to run very smoothly. My education sessions varied throughout the whole year as different groups of students rotated. One day I would be teaching lumbar puncture skills and the following day "how to break bad news". This variety meant things were never dull, and each day was a new challenge. A significant part of the year I spent organising and managing the final year hospital-based programme. Planning, organising, and delivering the programme was a great learning experience. Creating the programme and seeing it through to its completion was extremely rewarding. Watching the students grow in confidence and develop their skills was a new experience for me and the most exciting and satisfying part of being a teacher.

The Certificate in Medical Education

In September I enrolled on the Certificate of Medical Education programme at Newcastle University which I found supported my role immensely. The CMED course at times was quite theoretical; however the use of reflective practice and planning of educational programmes was very helpful. I would certainly recommend this course to any health professional interested in medical education.

Career opportunities

Consultants within the NHS are often contracted to provide education at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. Taking a year out to concentrate on education will certainly provide the necessary skills for teaching in the future. Medical education and teaching is recognised in all specialist training programmes and makes up a substantial part of a consultant role. I found throughout my year I developed skills in supervision, assessment, organisation, communication and teaching. In modern-day medicine with the introduction of appraisal, evaluation, continuing education and multidisciplinary working these skills I believe are essential for any practising consultant.

Why should you consider it ?

The year as a teaching fellow was an excellent experience. It provided the opportunity to step back from clinical medicine and to focus on something I thoroughly enjoyed. I had the opportunity to work with a brilliant group of individuals and develop skills in running an education programme. The whole experience brought challenges I wasn't anticipating and rewards I never expected. As we all become more pressured to decide our careers early and run-through training is among us, I would certainly advise taking time to consider a year in education ... it might be one of the best and most rewarding years of your career!