



Starting out in physiotherapy

Nione Meakin continues her series of feature interviews with young graduates starting out in their chosen careers

JENNIFER Hiscock is one of the lucky ones. She has just started work as a physiotherapist, a career for which there are plenty of eager candidates but few jobs.

More and more people have started to study physiotherapy in recent years but there has not been a similar increase in the number of NHS vacancies, meaning hundreds of graduates are stuck twiddling their thumbs at home until positions come up.

Jennifer, 22, from Gloucestershire, had to wait almost a year after graduating to get her dream job.

She used her time productively, working part-time at a care home and part-time as a physiotherapy assistant at Gloucester Hospital, a job she had secured though months of persistence.

In her spare time, she ran fitness classes for elderly people in her local village hall, was involved in a graduate support group to keep her knowledge up to scratch and looked into volunteering for Riding for the Disabled.

It was this extracurricular work that she believes helped her to bag her current job.

She said: "Trying to do a little bit here and there certainly helps because it shows potential employers you're doing what you can to keep your skills updated.

"There will always be another bunch of physio graduates and their skills will be fresher than yours, so you really need to keep your hand in while you're waiting for a job."

Gloucester eventually increased her hours, before offering her a permanent position in April this year.

Degree studies

Jennifer had studied for a BSc in Physiotherapy at the University of Wales College of Medicine, one of a limited number of places that offers the three-year degree course.

She chose physiotherapy after first considering nursing. She decided on the former because she wanted to do 'something a bit more sciencey'.

Work experience at Swindon's Princess Margaret Hospital gave her an insight into the day-to-day work of a physiotherapist.

"I got to see all the different areas of physiotherapy, like outpatients, respiratory and so on," she said,

"It was really good to get a view of the whole thing."

The first year was 'mainly lectures', but in the second and third year, the focus moved to work placements.

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Work placements

Jennifer completed eight four-week placements in total, spending time in hospitals across Wales.

She said: "They were brilliant. You're treated like a physio but you've got the support there, so you're learning as you go.

"You get used to being in a hospital and comfortable with patients."

The course also included practical sessions, where students practiced techniques, played out 'patient-physio' scenarios and discussed what they had learned.

She graduated in July last year and took the job in the care home shortly afterwards.

She had initially applied for a job at Gloucester, but there was then a jobs freeze.

Not to be deterred, Jennifer continued to email the hospital every few weeks to see if the situation had changed.

Eventually they were able to offer her some hours as a physiotherapy assistant, which were gradually increased.

When a junior role came up, Jennifer, already in place at the hospital, had a massive advantage.

She said: "They interviewed the people that already worked there and a few people that had written to them.

"The people who were already working as temporary physiotherapists got contacted."

Jennifer has now been in the role for just over a month and is thrilled to finally be doing what she trained to do.

She said: "I'm really enjoying it.

"Having worked as a physiotherapy assistant after qualifying I'm finding it really good to have the responsibility of having my own patients and making my own clinical decisions about what to do with them.

"It's just really nice to be finally working – I had all my skills and I wanted to use them."

A working day

A typical day begins at 8.30 am, when the physios meet and are allocated their wards for the day.

Jennifer usually covers two wards and is brought up to speed on her patients by the nurses. She then has to prioritise whom she sees first.

"New patients are generally a priority because they haven't been seen before and people with respiratory problems are also a priority," she said.

Physio assistants help Jennifer with patients who require two people to work on them.

"It's quite difficult when you're newly qualified and still quite young - people don't take you seriously."

Notes must be written up on each patient and then discussed with the nurses to flag up any problems and anything that will require a doctor's involvement.

As a new physiotherapist, this can often be one of the most daunting aspects of the job.

Jennifer explained: "It's quite difficult when you're newly qualified and still quite young - people don't take you seriously."

“They look at you and think you can’t know much because you’re so young.

“I find I have to be more assertive, not so much with patients but with nursing staff.

“They are under pressure to get patients discharged but if I have a patient I know isn’t ready to go home from a physio point of view, I have to stand up for myself and say they are not ready.”

“You’re getting people on their feet for the first time after an operation and trying to get them up on their new hip or knee, helping them get their mobility back.”

The next two years will be spent rotating around the different hospital departments, to strengthen her knowledge.

Jennifer is currently working in Orthopaedics, helping people with damaged knees and hips or those who have broken bones in accidents.

She said: “You’re getting people on their feet for the first time after an operation and trying to get them up on their new hip or knee, helping them get their mobility back.

“If I was in Respiratory, I’d be looking after people’s chests all day.”

Moving on

As far as current career development goes, Jennifer is just happy learning her trade. But when the time comes to move upwards, she is worried it is going to be a struggle again.

“I’m not sure how it will work out because of the job situation. People aren’t moving up to senior positions as quickly because of the lack of jobs.

“I may have to stay as a junior until a job comes up.

“It doesn’t worry me at the moment because I’m concentrating on where I am now, but I’m hoping in a few years the situation will have changed.”

Jennifer may eventually specialise in one area, but said she would keep rotating through the departments until she found something she really enjoyed.

She described the job as a cross between

science, medicine and sociology, adding: “Physiotherapy is all evidence based, like medicine.

“Everything you do has been researched thoroughly so you can prove why you’re doing it.

“It’s quite scientific but it’s also about caring and sociology comes into it – you’re meeting people from all walks of life.”

She said perseverance was an essential for any would-be physio.

“If you know it’s something you really want to do, you just have to persevere and hope it will pay off.

“You also have to be very motivated.

“You not only have to motivate yourself, but when you go to work you have to motivate other people.

“People don’t always want to get out of bed and walk straight after an operation.”

For Jennifer, the hard work and the waiting has all been worth it.

“It’s a really rewarding job,” she said,

“When you first meet a patient and everything is really difficult it can get you down, but when they go home and you know you’ve made a difference to them, it’s really rewarding.

“People are always down on the NHS and yes, the situation can be difficult, but when you get your job and you’re doing something you want to do, it’s brilliant.”

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Further information

The Chartered Society of Physiotherapy

is the professional, educational and trade union body for the country’s 47,000 chartered physiotherapists, physiotherapy students and assistants.

The CSP website at www.csp.org.uk has background careers information and details of all qualifying courses.