Education in mental health

There has been a lot of press about mental health in recent months and it is clear that everyone is more aware of how important mental health issues are, not only for personal wellbeing but for economic development. One individual who is seeing this first-hand is Dr Neil Ralph.

Based at Health Education England, the NHS arm responsible for the education and training of the healthcare workforce for England, he manages a team who are responsible for developing and implementing the national strategy for the training of the mental health and learning disability workforce.

‘My day-to-day activities revolve around managing a team of 20 people and working with colleagues around the country who will commission training and other activities to develop the workforce in their local areas. I also spend my time working with colleagues in the Department of Health, NHS England and national clinical leaders as we join up at the national level to work towards the same aims.’

A varied career

Neil started out as a technology sales consultant before becoming an assistant psychologist in his mid-twenties. After completing his doctorate he worked as a psychological therapist in a north London NHS mental health service where he moved into a team manager position. Since then he has worked in clinical and training settings, before moving to his current role.

‘Despite my degree not being a pre-requisite for my current role, I do not think I could function in the role without it. It has provided me with the solid foundation in working in the NHS and a broad understanding of the fields of mental health and learning disability from both a clinical and system perspective. Important to this is an appreciation of the patient and the clinician’s experience, as well as an appreciation of what good care looks like.’

The clinical path

For those interested in working in a clinical setting, Neil advises getting experience. ‘It is understandably challenging and not for all, but it can be hugely rewarding. I would also look at the array of career options available; clinical psychology is the one I chose, and it is a fascinating area to train and work in, but not the only option.’

He also advocates following your interests, even if this means taking risks – and he is practicing what he preaches. ‘When I qualified, I would never have dreamt that I would have ended up in a leadership role at a national level and could have missed the opportunity if I was not willing to follow my interests and to push myself out of my comfort zone. I feel very privileged to be in this role, especially at a time when great efforts are being made to try to improve the quality of care in mental health and learning disability services. I am very keen to play my part in ensuring these improvements are achieved and will be seeking to further develop my role as a national programme manager to achieve this.’