

# My career story



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20 years in clinical trial management

## Tell us your story...

Working in Clinical trials wasn't my initial goal, my original intention throughout completing my PhD in Reproduction and Immunology was to work as a post-doc in the field of immunology, and to eventually lead my own research group. Even back then though, I wasn't that keen on the academic elements of putting together grant proposals, keeping up to date with new developments in the field, or even the teaching aspect of the role!

Fortunately, at the same time as writing up my PhD, I took a job as Clinical Scientist at Bristol Haematology and Oncology Centre. I worked on a fascinating project designed to examine the effects on a baby if they were exposed to pesticides and radionuclides in utero. The project involved developing a placental barrier model and required me to collect placentae from mothers. My interest in clinical trials was piqued and grew from here as I learned about regulatory requirements, working with human subjects, and tackling ethical considerations surrounding consent. Through this work I learnt a bit about the wider portfolio of clinical trials being run within the Oncology centre.

After successfully obtaining my PhD, I was given the opportunity to run my own immunology group, but at the same time I also applied for a job as a trial co-ordinator.

I had a hard decision, on the one hand I could move to London and have the responsibility of my own research group, and on the other I could stay in my hometown - where I had just bought a house - to become more involved in running clinical trials. I was interested in research that improved patient health, I really enjoyed project and people management, I wanted more of a professional service career than an academic one... but I also wanted to do something where my academic talent wouldn't be wasted.

After some soul searching, I decided that Clinical trials seemed to offer all the elements I was after, and so my clinical trial career began!

# What do you think were the key milestones that got you to your current trial management role?

I have had the privilege of working in clinical trials for almost 20 years at Bristol University, working across two very different trial units, both filled with very talented people, before supporting the restructure of the two former units into one centre of excellence.

Personally, I have progressed through the different levels of trial management, gaining experience firstly as a trial co-ordinator, before moving to a trial manager position, then to senior trial manager looking after a portfolio of studies, to my current position as Head of Operations.

Some of the key milestones that have helped me achieve my current position include hands on experience working across different phases of various studies, working on trials of different designs, and working in vastly different settings. At this point I've managed everything from small single centre surgical trials, studies in emergency settings, primary care, secondary care, community based trials, drug studies, device studies, complex interventions .... The list goes on.

To be successful in an academic trials unit I have had to wear lots of different hats, from becoming an expert in clinical trial regulations, quality assurance, and database design and development, to having an reasonable understanding of the clinical areas I've worked in, as well as honing project management and people management skills.

Early in my career I looked for as many opportunities as possible to attend training courses and conferences relating to trial regulations, conduct, and quality assurance. I started to sit on internal committees and working groups, streamlining and developing processes that could be applied to a portfolio of studies. I completed a MSc in clinical trials alongside working full time, which provided me with an excellent foundation around how trials should be designed and run.

As my career progressed, I started to network more widely, working with other CTUs, sitting on external groups, and taking part in national consultations. My professional development became more focused on developing soft skills, I engaged in leadership and mentorship programmes, developing skills around negotiating and influencing people at different levels and I have certainly become more resilient and comfortable dealing with complex problems and difficult situations, including working with some interesting individuals over the years!

# What top three key skills do you think have been key to your development as a clinical trials' management professional?

- An ability to influence others.
- Being resilient and adaptable to different situations.
- An ability to solve problems and drive things through to a satisfactory resolution.

# What has been the main challenge that you have encountered on your professional development journey in clinical trial management? Are you able to share any tips to help others circumnavigate this challenge?

One of the main challenges while developing my career has been finding suitable opportunities to progress. An opportunity presented itself when I recognised my original role as senior trial manager had evolved beyond all recognition to a more operational role across the unit. I raised this with the directors of the unit and we wrote a new job description and asked for my role to be re-evaluated.

We chose for the role to sit under the professional service pathway, as the role was more focused around a professional service skillset rather than an academic skillset.

After a journey through a myriad of HR processes and evidence gathering work, we managed to successfully get the position re-graded. I believe that if we had made the decision to put the role on the academic pathway I would not have met the university criteria to be a senior academic; I do not bring in my own funding nor do I have an international research reputation or publication record.

## Key Tips:

- Be prepared to work at a higher level than your job description to gain appropriate experience
- Be prepared to move between organisations to take advantage of opportunities
- Recognise your skill set and carve out your own opportunities