

Applying experience

BY CHARLOTTE ALCOCK

THE thought of following a career path in psychology can be demoralising when you're at the beginning of a very long road, with poorly paid training and thousands of others all fighting to move in the same direction. However, it is important to remain optimistic and to set oneself clear goals. Before the summer holidays I decided to approach the Gloucestershire Royal Hospital Health Psychology Department about doing a placement over the summer. Much to my amazement, six weeks later I was attending the hospital induction day.

Gloucestershire Royal Hospital Health Psychology Department is the largest NHS department of its kind in the UK, currently employing 10 clinical psychologists and three health psychologists. The role of the department is to provide a quality service to patients, staff and the organisation, based on the recognition of how psychological factors relate to health and the delivery of healthcare services. I was struck by the variety of different disciplines within the department, and as I spoke to each psychologist individually it became clear just how diverse work within a health psychology department could be.

The majority of the psychologists work in multidisciplinary teams to provide a high level of all-encompassing care. Before my placement, I was unaware that psychology within the NHS is structured in such a way. For example, I saw how a psychologist would contribute to a team by sitting in every week on a cardiac rehabilitation group. Such groups operate over seven-week periods, with subsequent follow-up sessions eight weeks and six months later, and give patients and their partners the opportunity to access information following their heart attack or surgery.

The multidisciplinary team, consisting of a psychologist, cardiac nurse and physiotherapist, work together to provide patients with support and knowledge aiming to reduce the likelihood of future cardiac problems. Issues relating to pacing,



goal setting and stress are very much on the agenda for the psychologist and have clear links with aspects taught by other team members, such as how much exercise is appropriate following a heart attack.

Multidisciplinary teams incorporating a psychologist also exist in the areas of pain management, palliative care, renal care, neurology, care for older people and head injury. Other divisions sometimes operate on a more one-to-one basis, with the staff working in close partnership to meet the needs of the patient. In many cases the psychologist also provides a service for the family of the patient, as the need for the services often corresponds with traumatic life events affecting the family just as much as the patient.

I found the area of head injury particularly interesting and was able to work regularly as a volunteer at Headway

House, a national head injury charity based at Gloucestershire Royal Hospital. The work was diverse, from assessing a patient's reading and writing abilities to making a clay pot and playing Scrabble. I found that volunteering is not only extremely interesting and rewarding but it is good for the 'clinical CV' too – I would recommend it to anyone interested in neuropsychology. It's a great introduction that does not blind you with science but raises awareness about disabilities resulting from head injury and strokes.

It has become clear to me that the applied world of psychology goes hand in hand with psychological research, and that it is vital for practising psychologists to keep up-to-date with new findings and advances within the profession. While working in the department I listened to a number of presentations given by psychologists and trainees on conferences they had attended and on their personal research projects and findings. Research is clearly an integral and fascinating part of the profession, which ensures that applied psychology is always moving forward and never has the chance to become static and set in its ways. My placement has also stressed the importance of SPSS: statistical training will come in useful beyond university and statistical exams!

Having completed my placement, I feel confident that the path to becoming a clinical psychologist is the path I want to follow. It is such a diverse career, and every psychologist that I have spoken to has said that a big bonus of the profession is that the work is never monotonous – no two days are ever the same. My placement has proved that undergraduates can open the door to applied psychology and to hands-on experience. So don't let the negativity of others put you off – where there's a will there's a way!

■ *Charlotte Alcock is a third-year psychology and sociology undergraduate at Warwick University.*

PSYPAG CONFERENCE 2002

Give a 20-minute talk or present a poster on your research in a friendly atmosphere – or just come and watch. The conference runs from Monday 22 to Wednesday 24 July: registration: 2pm–6pm Monday 22 July. To book, print off a copy of the registration form from the conference website: www.cardiff.ac.uk/psych/home/psypag to send with your £30 fee (payable to Cardiff University) to PsyPAG Conference, School of Psychology, Cardiff University, PO Box 901, Cardiff CF10 3YG. Accommodation will need to be arranged separately. Details of accommodation in Cardiff can be found at the conference website. Child care is available, but book early! For details see www.cardiff.ac.uk/ssd/daycare/

Associate Editor: DANIELA SCHULZE

Articles, cartoons and other contributions for the 'Students' page are most welcome.

Send to: Daniela Schulze, c/o the Society's Leicester office. E-mail: d.schulze@psy.gla.ac.uk