

Ruth Simmons

Epidemiologist at Public Health England

Tell us about your current role and organisation.

I work for Public Health England which exists to protect and improve the nation's health and wellbeing, and reduce health inequalities.

Within PHE, I am epidemiologist, and I am one of the surveillance leads for hepatitis and I also lead on the health protection research unit mapping the cascade of care for persons with hepatitis and targeting the undiagnosed burden.

How did you move from academia to your current role?

My first degree was in environmental science and IT, and I really enjoyed working with data. When I graduated, I got a job at PHE as an information officer, data entering and cleaning data. I would ask for more work and I started to develop my skills supporting the scientific staff, and really enjoyed that side of the work. During this time I got a few promotions and undertook a masters in epidemiology and moved into a more scientific role. At the time I work for the HIV team, and I hit a ceiling. So I left to do my PhD, and at the end I was offered a job in academia or back at PHE. I took the PHE role, to raise the profile of hepatitis, using my knowledge and experience of working with HIV. Which is where I am now.

What does a normal working day look like for you?

My time is spent supporting my team, working towards the priorities required as part of our work and also investigating the data to answer questions raised during discussion. It really depends, today, I wrote a presentation, then I had a meeting about a seroprevalence study one of my team is going to write up about HAV and vaccine susceptibility in high risk populations, I started editing a literature review, adding some additional papers I pulled at the weekend. I also responded to some emails, chased some data, and caught up with my team about any outstanding work. Reminded myself about some analysis I added to the presentation.

What are the best things about working in your role?

No day is the same. Developing relationships with collaborators and cross team working. Working with data and seeing the hard work undertaken by my team published as a peer review paper, and that that data will contribute to public health.

What are the biggest challenges you face in your work?

Things can take time, and when they take time new data comes out so you end up updating your work again.

Being a manager. I enjoy working with my team, developing them and supporting them but is the bureaucratic process and the form filling in.

Also remembering everything. Remembering all the hepatitis tests what they mean and what impact they have.

I also struggle with the public health focus, I'm more epidemiology and numbers.

What's the progression like/where do you see yourself going from here?

There is progression, I went from an information officer to a senior scientist, doing all the roles in between. But right now I don't know what's next for me, and I am at the point, perhaps there is a similar careers talk to see what's next for me.

What top tips would you pass on to researchers interested in this type of work?

Become multi skilled, don't be afraid to get involved in something different, it might give you that edge over someone else that you did that something. Be passionate about what you do, because sometimes it doesn't go right but that passion will drive you forward. I know being out in the field or writing the paper is exciting but that's only as good as the data you have it have collected, cleaning the data even entering some of the data means that you understand it even more and that you can scrutinise it fully.