

Online Interview with Dr David Fearnley



Dr David Fearnley, aged 41, is a Consultant Forensic Psychiatrist at Ashworth Hospital, a high secure psychiatric hospital in Merseyside, UK. He is also the Medical Director of Mersey Care NHS Trust, which is a large mental health and learning disability trust and one of three in England that have a high secure service. As Medical Director he is responsible for the performance of over 175 doctors, 50 pharmacists and has the lead responsibility for R&D and information governance. He is the College Special Advisor on Appraisal at the Royal College of Psychiatrists and has an interest in the development of management and leadership skills in doctors.

How long have you been working in your specialty?

I started training in psychiatry in 1994, and undertook specialist registrar training between 1998 and 2001. I became a consultant forensic psychiatrist in a high secure hospital in 2001 and medical director for the wider trust in 2005.

Which aspect of your work do you find most satisfying?

I have always found clinical work satisfying, and particularly when it becomes linked to wider service changes. I think this is why I decided to take on management responsibilities in addition to my clinical work so that I could continue to work at this interface.

What achievements are you most proud of in your medical career?

I have been particularly pleased whenever I have passed my exams and I have been able to make progress in my career. Also, in 2009 I won the inaugural Royal College of Psychiatrists Psychiatrist of the Year award, largely because of my innovative approach to involving service users and carers in their treatment.

Which part of your job do you enjoy the least?

I find that I dislike having to read poorly written reports because of the limited time available to do other things!

What are your views about the current status of medical training in your country and what do you think needs to change?

In my view, medical training in England is of an exceptionally high standard although more emphasis will need to be brought into training around management and leadership.

How would you encourage more medical students into entering your speciality?

I think medical students should be exposed to mental health services as soon as possible, to see not only the clinical aspects but appreciate the organisational structures.

What qualities do you think a good trainee should possess?

I think trainees should develop a sense of respect for everybody they work with including the service users and carers, particularly when they feel under pressure. This is, in my opinion, the hallmark of somebody who will make a great clinician.

What is the most important advice you could offer to a new trainee?

I think new trainees should create habits in terms of acquiring new knowledge (particularly evidence based knowledge) so that they build up a sense of lifelong learning that extends beyond clinical examinations.

What qualities do you think a good trainer should possess?

A good trainer should be approachable and accessible, with a willingness to challenge the status quo but also show interest in the life of the trainee.

Do you think doctors are over-regulated compared with other professions?

The medical profession is entering the phase of increased regulation through revalidation. I think this is an acceptable position in view of the enormous privilege that practicing medicine offers and the need to assure the public that doctors are fit to practise.

Is there any aspect of current health policies in your country that are de-professionalising doctors? If yes what should be done to counter this trend?

I think doctors are becoming better at identifying certain tasks that others are equally capable of undertaking. I think doctors should be continually seeking out areas of healthcare that they alone have the skills, knowledge and attitude to be responsible for.

Which scientific paper/publication has influenced you the most?

I have found the work of the Cochrane Collaboration (rather than a single publication) to influence me considerably because it made me aware, through the work of the Archie Cochrane, the importance of standing back and comparing more than one study whenever possible.

What single area of medical research in your speciality should be given priority?

I think the overlap between mental illness and personality disorder is not understood well enough and yet is a major reason for patients remaining in secure care longer than perhaps they might need to in the future.

What is the most challenging area in your speciality that needs further development?

As a medical manager, I think that more needs to be done to encourage doctors to see management and leadership as part of their role as a professional and to gain competencies and confidence in these areas during their undergraduate and postgraduate training.

Which changes would substantially improve the quality of healthcare in your country?

Healthcare delivery in the UK is undergoing change following the publication of the coalition government's White Paper in health, and it is encouraging clinicians, particularly GPs, to take part in commissioning. I think this, alongside a focus on better outcome measures is likely to improve the quality of healthcare.

Do you think doctors can make a valuable contribution to healthcare management? If so how?

I think doctors are in a unique position following years of clinical training to make decisions in terms of management and leadership. They should be able to transfer their ability to manage particular cases over time to managing projects and resources both in operational and strategic terms.

How has the political environment affected your work?

The NHS has an element of political oversight that does influence the work, particularly in the high secure service where public protection is a key factor.

What are your interests outside of work?

My time outside work is spent almost exclusively with my family.

If you were not a doctor, what would you do?

I would like to be a writer (although I doubt I have the skills to do so successfully!)