

So you want to be ... a psychiatrist

Psychiatry is often known as 'the other half of medicine', and is the last truly clinical speciality. Thus psychiatrists take histories and conduct examinations, of both the physical and mental state, which in themselves substantially lead to the diagnosis.

There is no defining blood test or radiological investigation that can crack the case, although careful exclusion of possible physical factors or contributors to mental illness is mandatory. A psychiatric 'firm' (and teamwork is the norm) is therefore rather like a detective agency, quizzing the patient, his/her relatives or friends, checking out with GPs, social workers, the police, or even foreign embassies, and putting together often quite strange patient journeys.

Conditions range from the banal (e.g. people being fearful of going into crowded shops – up to 20% of the population has an anxiety problem at some time in their life) to the frightening (e.g. a psychotic young man wanting to cut his heart out) to the baffling patient with no name and muddled speech.

Psychiatrists usually choose to be so after an enlightening psychiatric attachment or because talking to patients seems more interesting than sticking things into them. An intercalated psychology degree can be helpful, but no more so than anthropology, the history of medicine, or even the history of art, ideas or science.

Specialties

Psychiatry also holds within it a wide range of differing job experiences, from the essentially psychotherapeutic work of a child psychiatrist to the casualty-like requirements of acute adult wards. Involvement in the law and criminology is part of forensic psychiatry (and even running places like Broadmoor) while addictions, old age and learning disability have their special fascinations.

Dr Trevor Turner is Consultant Psychiatrist and Clinical Director, East London and City Mental Health NHS Trust, Department of Psychiatry, East Wing, Homerton University Hospital, London E9 6SR

Liaison and neuropsychiatry deal with that elusive borderline between neurology and psychology, mind and brain, where functional magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scanning is now starting to reveal some extraordinary syntheses.

What do you need?

The 'core attributes' suggested by the Royal College of Psychiatrists (2004) in their *Good Psychiatric Practice* booklet include 14 bullet points, from 'clinical confidence', to the ability to bring 'empathy, courage and hope to patients and their carers' and 'a critical self-awareness of emotional responses to clinical situations'. Team leadership, decisiveness and the ability to appraise staff are also vital.

Currently senior house officer training consists of 3 years in approved rotations, doing 6-monthly jobs in a variety of specialties leading to the Membership qualification of the Royal College of Psychiatrists. Specialist registrar training incorporates three to four 1-year-long posts, depending on the requirements of the particular specialty, and off you go as a consultant. There are some preregistration jobs now established (in 4-monthly rotations) and it is likely that these will be included in a number of foundation, year 1 and 2, schemes.

Other qualities

Psychiatry is popular, with many applicants for most rotations, so experience in accident and emergency, neurology or



general medicine for a year beforehand always helps. People who do personal things, like going to the Antarctic or learning Sanskrit, are also usually welcomed. Psychiatry values the polymath.

But remember, you have to be able to manage complex psychopharmacology as well as intimate confessions, to deal with stigma, and to work with other quite independent professions (e.g. social work, law, probation, police, psychology). So literature, films and plays are all grist to the mill, and reading or viewing them entirely justifiable as continuing professional development. There is wide scope for additional work, in terms of lecturing, writing, medicolegal work and advisory boards, and psychiatrists are much in demand. Get going! **BJHM**

Royal College of Psychiatrists (2004) *Good Psychiatric Practice*. 2nd edn. Council Report CR125. Royal College of Psychiatrists, London

KEY POINTS

- Psychiatry is currently a shortage speciality and posts are continuing to expand.
- Psychiatry provides a wide range of clinical experiences, suited to a wide range of personalities.
- Modern psychopharmacology and cognitive psychology make for exciting research and therapeutics.
- Psychiatrists often have interests and training outside medicine, to their advantage.
- Psychiatrists have a well-established training programme and by and large continue to have a team-based 'firm' approach.
- Psychiatry is endearingly clinical – diagnosis and management depending on talking to people.
- Psychiatrists generally get better as they mature, perhaps because they are rarely called out at night.