Joe Rafferty spent the first 10 years of his career as a cancer researcher and was on the way to becoming a professor when the precarious nature of academic life began to pall. A chance conversation with the chief executive of Christie Hospital in Manchester and an advertisement for the NHS management trainee scheme made him think about a career change. “I was 35 and it was ‘do it now or never,’” he says. “Working in a lab environment you have to understand how to work with people, how to live in the moment but have a longer term view. You have to take different pieces of information and synthesise them. I felt I had the right skills.”

Rafferty got through the selection process and spent a year at Stepping Hill Hospital. He says he had no idea how a big acute trust was run and decided on a straightforward approach. “I’ve worked with clinicians throughout my career and I have always seen them as people I have to make things happen for,” he says.

He has had a range of management roles in the north west of England, including chief executive of NHS Central Lancashire and director of commissioning and strategy for NHS North West, as well as a national role as director of commissioning support at the NHS Commissioning Board. In the first six or seven years of his career, Rafferty says he went through about four organisational changes. However, it was the changes heralded by the 2012 Health and Social Care Act that had the biggest impact. “I saw a lot of good colleagues leave the NHS. There was a brain drain. An awful lot of people who were willing and enthusiastic about making the NHS work were struggling to see what their role would be,” he says.

He was then working for the NHS Commissioning Board, which was “probably the hardest job I have done in my career.” While he understood the value and the logic of having clinicians at the heart of commissioning, the speed of the change was “astonishing,” he says.

In 2012 he became chief executive of Mersey Care NHS Foundation Trust, his first in-depth experience of mental health. He believes the NHS can learn a lot from its neglected sibling. “Mental health has not been funded to the same extent as the rest of the NHS but we have managed to change services,” he says. “The thing that has most impressed me is the notion of co-production, the clinician and patient sitting down together and having a conversation.”

Four and a half years ago Mersey Care decided to remove physical and pharmaceutical restraint from its services after patients told staff that they were being re-traumatised. The trust—whose units include Ashworth high security hospital—has reduced the use of restraint by 50%. “We have had phenomenal success, including at Ashworth where we have some of the sickest and most vulnerable patients in the country,” says Rafferty. This has led to more of what Rafferty describes as “big, hairy, audacious goals,” that have nothing to do with financial targets but lots to do with improving patients’ lives. The trust is now pursuing a policy of Zero Suicide, wanting to ensure that no patient in its care kills themselves. “With this approach we have encouraged our clinicians to think creatively about what we need to do to achieve this,” he says.

To nominate someone who has been a role model during your medical career, send their name, job title, and the reason for your nomination to arimmer@bmj.com.

Anne Gulland, BMJ Careers, London
Mary Black

Likely to change the rules

What was your earliest ambition?
To be a marine biologist.

Who has been your biggest inspiration?
My aunt, Kate Fitzgerald, who was a nun and a doctor and ran hospitals in Nigeria and Malawi. She left the church and subsequently worked in mental health, coloured her hair red, and drove erratically around the Irish countryside.

What was the worst mistake in your career?
As an intern I left some breast biopsy samples on a shelf for a week without formalin. I remain concerned with safe logistics.

What was your best career move?
Becoming foundation professor of public health at the University of Queensland.

Who has been the best and the worst health secretary?
Bevan was best. Lansley and Hunt hail from a more cynical era, when the public sector is being attacked, and they’ve both failed to turn that tide.

Who is the person you would most like to thank, and why?
My husband, for wise advice and mutual additions to the gene pool.

To whom would you most like to apologise?
Anyone to whom I’ve harboured resentment. I apologise for giving them that much attention.

Where are or when were you happiest?
The night my daughter was born: I experienced hours of spiritual enlightenment. Years later my husband told me that he’d thought I was just rambling.

What single change has made the most difference in your field?
The internet has democratised information, enabling us to partner with all sorts of colleagues, patients, and specialties, as well as the public.

Do you support doctor assisted suicide?
Yes, but I’m nervous about how it may change society and how it will work.

What book should every doctor read?
The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks by the science writer Rebecca Skloot.

What is your guiltiest pleasure?
Extending my carbon footprint on flights to Melbourne to hang out with my son.

What is your most treasured possession?
My health. Also, as a taxpayer, I own a tiny slice of that miracle of common good—the NHS.

What personal ambition do you still have?
A full lotus position.

Summarise your personality in three words
Clever, tolerant, creative, and likely to change the rules.

Do you have any regrets about becoming a doctor?
None. It’s an honour and a privilege.

If you weren’t in your present position what would you be doing instead?
Depending on the turn of life’s dice, it could’ve been anything. I’ll never know.