



CAREERS

John Ribchester: pioneering in general practice

The GP surgeon, who has championed new care models speaks to **Kathy Oxtoby**

Kathy Oxtoby

The best choice

When I was 14 years old, I decided that being a doctor was the only career for me. I was keen on sciences and both my parents were physics graduates, but my favourite science was biology. A career in medicine seemed the best possible choice. I didn't have a plan B.

Specialty choice

Initially I trained in surgery, but switched to general practice as I wanted a career that offered more continuity of patient care and a more holistic approach. I realised the idea of caring for people and families, rather than referring to patients as “hernia in bed one” or “gallbladder in bed two,” was more satisfying.

The GP surgeon

I decided to combine surgical and general practice skills, and when I joined Whitstable Medical Practice in 1979 there was an operating theatre in a community hospital. For about 12 years, twice a week, I carried out operations in three disciplines—general surgery, gynaecology, and orthopaedics. I've also run a sports injury clinic for a number of years.

Bridging the divide

The opportunity to use my hospital acquired skills in a community setting got me interested in the idea of integrated healthcare, as opposed to primary and secondary care where “never the twain shall meet”—which is sadly the situation for most doctors. That interest has become a lifelong passion.

Growing a practice

Since 1995 I've been executive and managing partner for Whitstable Medical Practice. During this time the practice has grown from a single site, 12 GP partnership to an integrated general practice at scale with 23 GPs, nearly 200 staff, and 40 000 patients served from four sites.

From the heart

Our practice is the “hub” at the heart of a primary care network. We provide list based general practice to the entire population

of Whitstable, alongside a range of healthcare services that would otherwise require a trip to hospital. These can be accessed by patients from a wider area and include diagnostics, outpatients and procedures, screening services, and day surgery.

Building new models

One of my career highlights has been leading a new model of care—the Encompass Multispecialty Community Provider. Our initiatives have provided a better patient experience, better health outcomes, and both clinical and financial economies. Our challenge now is to help roll out the care model throughout Kent, which has a patient population of over 1.8 million.

On receiving an MBE

In 2018 I was awarded an MBE in the Queen's birthday honours list for services to general practice, which I received in front of my family. It was an exciting and humbling experience. But as far as I was concerned the award was for everybody's work in our team.

Next generation

I've been invited to join the development board for the Kent and Medway Medical School which opens in 2020. This includes the ambition for the practice to become a medical student community learning hub.

Future ambitions

I don't have any plans to retire yet but I imagine I'll wind down a bit. I want to carry on working part time at least until I'm 70. All the time I'm trying to change and improve models of health and social care. I feel I'm making some progress, and making a difference. It's worthwhile work—and I don't think I've finished yet.

Career timeline

1979-present GP, executive partner, Whitstable Medical Practice, Whitstable

2015-2018 Chair and clinical lead of the Encompass Multispecialty Community Provider vanguard

2006-2012 GP with a special interest for surgery in primary care and also carpal tunnel decompression surgery

July 2007-September 2008 Medical manager of the Canterbury and Coastal Commissioning Consortium

2001-2005 GP adviser to the Department of Health

1975-1979 King's College, London