CAREERS

Role model: Trudi Seneviratne

Jacqui Wise speaks to Trudi Seneviratne, consultant adult and perinatal psychiatrist at the South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust

Jacqui Wise

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Trudi Seneviratne vividly recalls visiting the wards in the old Hackney psychiatric hospital when she was still a medical student. "There were faeces in the toilets that were not cleaned, badly painted walls, and horrible furniture," she says. "I thought 'how can anyone get better in this environment?' I realised that psychiatry was at the back end of medicine, the bottom of the pile."

Whereas this would have put most students off entering psychiatry—it had the opposite effect on Seneviratne. "I thought, 'In my lifetime, I am going to make a difference in this,'" she says.

Seneviratne trained at St Bartholomew's medical school in London and was inspired by the psychiatrists who taught her. "They were by far the most passionate doctors I came across. They really cared about their patients and spent a lot of time getting to know the whole person."

Seneviratne was born in Sri Lanka, coming to the UK at the age of seven. She was inspired to go into medicine by her father, who was a paediatrician. "He loved the NHS and spoke very highly of the UK healthcare system."

When she told her father she wanted to specialise in psychiatry, however, he was horrified. "He thought, like many others, that a psychiatrist is not a real doctor. It was quite a battle convincing him."

Seneviratne decided to specialise in perinatal mental health after hearing Channi Kumar, professor of perinatal mental health, speak at a conference. "He gave the most inspiring talk about how mental health starts at conception. He said how important it is to nurture the mother during pregnancy and in the first few weeks after birth, as her mental health has a direct impact on the baby."

Seneviratne went on to carry out clinical research with Kumar at the Institute of Psychiatry in London. In 2002 she became a consultant at the Maudsley Hospital. She is a passionate advocate of mother and baby units, arguing that if a mother is experiencing mental health problems it is important to keep her with her baby if at all possible.

Alongside her clinical work, Seneviratne has been involved in research into the importance of early intervention. The highlight of her career, she says, is contributing to the evidence which

resulted in the government giving £365m [€417m; \$488m] for perinatal mental health services in 2016, as part of NHS England's *Five Year Forward View*.

Two years ago, Seneviratne was elected chair of the faculty of perinatal psychiatry at the Royal College of Psychiatry. She supports calls for all women to be screened for mental health problems after giving birth, but says there should also be screening during pregnancy. She says, "We know women don't come forward for support as they worry their baby may be removed or they will be deemed to be an incompetent parent."

Perinatal mental health is going through a revolution, Seneviratne says. "Three or four years ago there were barely any specialist perinatal services across England. Now, by April next year, in every patch of England, there will be a specialist perinatal mental health team."

She adds, "I feel privileged that I am part of that wave of research and change across England. I would love to spread a global message about how perinatal mental health should be a public health priority."

Seneviratne also works on parenting assessments when mothers have mental health problems, often giving evidence in family courts. "In this country, more and more babies are being removed when mothers have mental health problems. We need to think carefully about this as I don't think the assessment processes are always robust enough," she says.

Seneviratne also loves teaching and would like to inspire students to do psychiatry. "Psychiatry is still considered a third class specialism in medicine but it is the bedrock of our wellbeing," she says. "The brain is the most important organ that we have."

Nominated by Mano Manoharan, consultant perinatal psychiatrist

Trudi is an amazing role model for all perinatal psychiatrists. She is an excellent clinician and a compassionate leader; she excels at mentoring junior colleagues and preparing them to be clinical leaders; and she maintains a good work-life balance while juggling her many responsibilities.

Trudi wears many hats as a consultant and clinician, a researcher, a leader, and a compassionate mentor and manager.

Nominate a role model: 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