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The pioneering female academic GP: Debbie Sharp

The professor of primary healthcare talks to **Marika Davies** about being the first woman throughout her academic career

Marika Davies

In 1994 Debbie Sharp became the first professor of primary healthcare at the University of Bristol. It was a new department in a conservative establishment, and she encountered considerable resistance to her appointment. "I had to work quite hard to be accepted as a woman, as a professor, and as an academic GP," she recalls. "In the end it was fine, but I think it could have been easier than it was."

Throughout her career Sharp was often the first woman to take up a role, an experience she describes as ghastly. "I think people don't see you as a professional, they just see you simply as a woman, and women have a particular role in their lives," she says.

Sharp began her career by reading biochemistry at Oxford but soon realised that she wanted to study medicine. "I didn't want to do science for science's sake; it was how science works with people that I wanted to get into," she recalls.

Sharp made the switch to medicine and never looked back, graduating from Oxford in 1977. After completing her GP training in Oxford, she moved to Amsterdam to work in the drug industry, where she gained valuable experience in mental health research. She returned to London in 1983 to pursue a career combining both general practice and academia. She also continued her interest in mental health research with a PhD on childbirth related mental health disorders.

At the University of Bristol, Sharp developed academic training for GP trainees while working locally as a GP partner. She was later appointed as Head of the Medical School and sat on the General Medical Council's council and education committee.

Until that point in Sharp's career, there had been very few women to act as role models, but at the GMC she met women who really cared about what they were doing. "They cared about patients, probity, safety, quality of care, their trainees, and undergraduate education, so I could see the sorts of roles that were possible in the future for me," she recalls.

"I think it's easier for people today to find role models; medicine has diversified and if you're a woman there are many more women out there for you to look at and think about and pick bits off."

Sharp encourages her trainees to take their time when making important decisions in both their professional and personal lives. "Don't choose a specialty too early, and think carefully about your PhD, it's a long slog," she says. "I also tell them to choose their life partner carefully, because that will make a big

difference to whether or not they can get through the difficult bits of being a junior academic doctor."

Since 2010 Sharp has focused on her role as head of the school of clinical academic training in Bristol and is proud to have led the development of academic clinical practice across all specialties. "We have attracted fantastically bright, able, interesting, fun people to this group," she says. "You know that you're going to leave that part of the profession in good hands, and that's very important."

Outside of work Sharp has a passion for riding dressage horses both as a distraction and as a personal challenge, rather than for competitive reasons. "You cannot think about work when you're riding a great big horse, you've got to concentrate," she says. "I don't need to go out and prove myself in front of a judge; academic life is very competitive, and I want to keep my horses for sheer enjoyment."

During the covid-19 pandemic, Sharp was able to continue working from home in her academic role and returned to her former GP practice as soon as she could to help with the vaccination programme. "I'm really enjoying doing something useful. Seeing my old patients and working with my old partners is good fun."

She is looking forward to visiting her house in France. "I go there to retreat and speak a bit of French and see my family. I'm counting the days until I can go back," she says. "We've all become a little more inward looking in the last year or so, and I'm hoping that we'll be able to look outward a bit more."

Nominated by Jessica Watson, Lucy Pocock, Charlotte Chamberlain, and Natalie Blencowe

"Debbie is a tireless champion of academic trainees and a role model to a generation of women in academic medicine across the south west. Having smashed the glass ceiling as a GP partner and the first female professor of primary care in the UK, she has made it her mission to support trainees, regularly going above and beyond to help individuals to navigate the challenges of a clinical academic career. As head of school of clinical academic training for the Severn Deanery, she is a fiercely determined advocate for academic training and has shaped many doctors' careers through her mentorship, supporting trainees' academic ambitions and their personal wellbeing."

Jessica Watson is a National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) academic clinical lecturer at the University of Bristol, Lucy Pocock is a GP and an NIHR doctoral research fellow at the University of Bristol, Natalie Blencowe is an associate professor in surgery at the University of Bristol, and Charlotte Chamberlain is an NIHR academic clinical lecturer in palliative medicine.

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 tmoberly@bmj.com