

A path to leadership

BY RUTH THOMSEN

In this article we learn more about the Ruth Thomsen's journey in audiology and healthcare science, exploring the opportunities on the road less travelled.

*"Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference."
From the poem 'The Road Not Taken' by
Robert Frost.*

Frost provides a simple lens to reflect on how choice and uncertainty, if embraced, can lead to making a difference. While my career path may appear a bit unorthodox and haphazard to some, it's been a series of choices driven by curiosity, the love of adventure, and a compulsion to take the road less travelled and explore its challenges.

My name is Ruth Thomsen (nee O'Brien) and my substantive post is as Scientific Director at NHSE London Region. It is a clinical leadership role that encompasses over 50 professional specialisms in the NHS. This includes my profession and true passion, audiology! Below are some of the current additional roles I undertake:

- Working party, World Health Organisation 'to improve access to services and technologies for hearing care' programme [1].
- Chair trustee for All Ears International, Cambodia (<http://allearscambodia.org>).
- National Lead for Sensory Health programme (Hearing) [2].
- Head of Leadership, Academy of Healthcare Science (www.ahcs.ac.uk/about/about-the-academy/leadership/).
- Chair, Regional Clinical Engineering Network [3].
- Clinical Director for Regional Diagnostics programme.
- National Board Physiological Sciences.



Crossing the Sahara during a trans Africa road trip.

My NHS career started at 18. By day, I worked as a student audiology technician at the School of Audiology, St Mary Abbots Hospital (SMA) and by night I stacked supermarket shelves. During this time, I also studied medical physics and physiological measurement on day release. I was qualified at age 20. Julie Wilkins taught me my skills, but I have also benefited from her generosity of spirit and compassionate leadership throughout my career. I have made lifelong friends who are audiologists – Zena, Seema, Gigi and Claire – all of whom have kept me on (and occasionally off) track. I have learned from some truly inspirational mentors – Prof Adrian Davis OBE, Paul-Erik Lyreguard, Dr Sue Fergy and Keith Ison. However, I believe I have gained the greatest insight and learning from patients, and have confidence that we have so much more to do in this space.

My career consists of lived experience in various locations:

- Trans Africa road trip (one-year sabbatical).
- Launching digital hearing aids, Denmark [4].
- Developing curriculum/undergraduate programmes for audiology, academia.
- Leading change, modernisation agency.
- Developing/delivering multiple leadership programmes - Academy of Healthcare Science.
- Chairing Research for Hearing and Tinnitus board, Department of Health/ NHS England.
- Co-producing the Action Plan on Hearing Loss, Office of the Chief Scientific Officer.
- Developing/delivering the Practice Educator Programme for Pathology, as interim Pathology Incident Director, NHSE Testing Cell.
- NHS lead of the ventilator challenge, Parliamentary Office.
- Delivered workforce and med tech support for military to establish the first Nightingale Hospital.
- Developed efficiency models for audiology and pathology with KPMG and EY (Consultancy firms).
- Developed Workforce plans for Healthcare Science, diagnostics Integrated Care Boards, Trusts and Health Education England.

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I have been honoured as NHS Inspirational Leader, International Clinical Engineering Leader, HCS Leader for Inspiring the workforce, AHA Innovation Award, AHCS Presidents Award, CSO workforce development and used the titles/honours to lever investment in HCS. I have also benefitted from four fellowships that include academic and experiential learning. Learning with peers outside of your own profession/ workplace really broadens thinking. Those fellowships were:

- EU travel fellowship in France.
- Blake fellowship studying audiology at California State University.
- CLAHRC fellowship working with NIHR to develop HCS networks across London.
- National Clinical Leader 60 Lead Clinicians across England.

I have also experienced the impact of stress. I have been the sole provider and single mum to three daughters, and carer to my mum (with dementia). I boasted about being Teflon-coated. I never believed stress could manifest itself as a physical condition until the evening I ended up in A&E, discovering I was having a panic attack. This taught me that surviving while meeting everyone else's needs can lead to losing sight of yourself. I have learned the importance of reflection, coaching, and mentoring. Finding out what brings you joy in work by understanding both your values and the values of those around you is key to having a healthy, sustainable career.

Top tips

- Work for the greater good - qualifications alone won't open doors to achievement.
- Make your own opportunities, be creative and brave.
- Take the road less travelled, discover and be inquisitive.



Ruth with her three daughters.

- Make friends and colleagues along the way – audiologists are the best crew!
- Compassionate leadership is key to enabling others and yourself.
- Karma – audiology is a small world, be gracious and acknowledge others' work.
- If you're passionate about something, get involved (complacency kills energy).
- Recognise that everyone is a contributor to the workplace culture, so strive to make it one you want to work in.

So, what's in the pipeline? Well, over the next few months, I will be part of national focus on hearing and the workforce, and supporting the following:

- Publishing the 'Action Plan on Hearing and Tinnitus Research'.
- Building the working groups to support the 'Review in Hearing Services'.
- Building the new AHCS 'Strategy for Leadership Development'.
- Building new models of care for World Health Organisation.
- Developing London's med tech strategy.
- Building the Physiological Sciences networks/workstreams.

There are lots of resources to help you take the road less travelled. Think about the questions below and check out the **links to resources:**

- Have you thought about your values and how they align with the NHS? NHS Staffing Pool Hub - What are the NHS values? www.nhsprofessionals.nhs.uk/nhs-staffing-pool-hub/working-in-healthcare/what-are-the-nhs-values
- How do you get the theory of happenstance to play a part in your career journey? Krumboltz JD. The Happenstance Learning Theory <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1069072708328861>
- Have you got the right support in place? Have you considered developing your leadership strengths? You can

start looking outside of the box at the Leadership Academy at www.leadershipacademy.nhs.uk

- Are you working to ensure you meet the Good Scientific Practice for the HCS workforce? www.ahcs.ac.uk/wpfd_file/ahcs-good-scientific-practice-2021

Be adventurous and make a difference!

References

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2. NHS England. Eye care, dental care and hearing checks in special residential schools. www.england.nhs.uk/learning-disabilities/improving-health/eye-care-dental-care-and-hearing-checks/
3. Global Clinical Engineering Day 2020 - Contribution from the UK – YouTube. www.youtube.com/watch?v=OcihsFHC3rc
4. Kent C. *Timeline: the evolution of hearing aids*. Medical Device Network. 2020. www.medicaldevice-network.com/features/digital-hearing-aid-history/

All links accessed May 2023.

AUTHOR



Ruth Thomsen,

CLAHRC Fellow; National Clinical Leadership Fellow; Blake Fellow; Scientific Director, NHSE London Region; Clinical Director for Physiological Sciences, NHSE London Region; National Lead for Hearing Checks Program for Children with Learning Disabilities and/or Autism, Wellington House, NHSE London.

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