

Mammography Associate Practitioner Case Study

Catherine Sheath qualified as a Mammography Associate in January 2023. Catherine is part of the mammography team at Dorset Breast Screening Unit at Poole Hospital, part of University Hospitals Dorset NHS Trust. Catherine works within the symptomatic and breast screening service.

What job did you have before you started the apprenticeship?

Before the apprenticeship, I spent about 15 years in childcare – and then I left just before COVID hit. I then did domiciliary care for 6 months or so, but it wasn't for me. I kept an eye out on the NHS job pages and saw this role.

Why the career change? What attracted you to the role of Mammography Associate?

I always wanted to do something clinical. Cancer obviously affects everyone but it has affected my family, so from a personal point of view it was of interest. I also wanted to study again - my children are all grown up and it was my time. I thought the role sounded really interesting, something that makes a difference and that's why I went for it. In my head I was thinking, "am I too old for this?" And then I just thought "no, I still have time to do this", so I started my career at the age of 45 which I think is amazing!

How was the training?

I was the first MA apprentice in our Unit and we were coming back from COVID so I was a bit of a guinea pig! The support that we had from the team at the Jarvis Education Centre and the Trust training lead and training team was fantastic. My colleagues too,



no matter what grade, were all so supportive. The hardest things for me was getting my head around the fact that mammography is a bit of a roller coaster – but sticking with it and having the support of everybody around was so helpful. Going back to studying at my age was difficult, but the team was so supportive, it was fantastic.

What do you like best about the role?

There a few things that I really enjoy. First of all, I like meeting the ladies. Obviously you meet a whole range of ladies, some are really nervous, some are completely fine with it.

You have a short snippet of time – six minutes – and in that time you need to gain their confidence and get the diagnostic images. Then when you look at your images, it's great when everything is ok. But on the other hand, if things are detected, it's good to know I've made a difference - that lady was unaware of this and now we can do something about it, so it's a really important role.

How do you feel your role contributes to your unit and your radiography colleagues?

Within the unit, as an associate you are doing mammograms within your scope of practice, so obviously that frees up all the grade 6 and 7 radiographers to do biopsies, see the assessment ladies and work on the screening vans, so that's a massive help. I'm a people-person so I think that really helps – that's why even though I had no background at all in the NHS, my transferable skills definitely have played a massive part.

How do you feel your role helps the people you perform mammograms on?

When a lady comes in the room I introduce myself. Some first time ladies are quite anxious so you need to be empathetic. As much as everyone knows the importance of breast screening, you want them to have a good experience so they come back to have mammograms in the future,

What would you say to anyone interested in becoming a Mammography Associate?

I'd say go for it – absolutely go for it. When I see the adverts for breast cancer awareness, I'm really proud to be part of this team and feel that I make a difference by screening those ladies. It's only six minutes but those six minutes could make a huge

difference to that lady's life. I am just so, so proud to do it and I would honestly say that anyone who's a people person, go for it. Also age-wise never write yourself off. Yes you have to get your head round the academic side but the support is there.

I am just really proud to be part of the team. When I got the job, I couldn't believe it and I haven't looked back. There hasn't been a day when I've thought "Agh, I've got to go to work today" and that's the absolute honest truth. It's not like that here - everybody is a team, it's like a family. And everyone I did the course with has found the same as well. Everyone's voice is heard and I think that's what stood out for me when I first came into breast screening, that everyone matters. It doesn't matter what grade you are - everyone matters and everyone is there for each other. And it's the same for the ladies and that filters down.

Going back to school, I'd have never thought that this was a job. It's not until you get older or you know someone who needed to be investigated for breast cancer, that you realise these roles exist. I do love it, I'm very lucky.

Reflecting on their experience with the Mammography Associate Apprenticeship, Nicola Chadwick, the unit's clinical education training lead added:

"Associate Mammographers are a hugely beneficial and valuable addition to the Breast Care team.

The associate mammography apprenticeship course is completed whilst employed and offers the opportunity for existing healthcare professionals to progress within their career. It also offers opportunities to women wishing to return to work after a career break or make a change of career direction.

Catherine was Dorset Breast Screening Unit's first Mammography Associate. Throughout the training period, Catherine quickly became an invaluable member of the breast care team, carrying out screening and supporting the wider department.

Whilst Catherine was undertaking the course the healthcare sector was facing huge challenges, however with her determination, the support from the Jarvis Education Centre in collaboration with the Royal Free Hospital and the Dorset breast screening training team, Catherine successfully achieved a distinction in the Mammography Associate apprenticeship course."