



WHY I CHOSE A CAREER IN ACADEMIC CLINICAL ONCOLOGY

Dr Ben O'Leary

Clinical Oncology Trainee and PhD Student

I started in clinical oncology as a NIHR academic clinical fellow (ACF) at ST3. Having had some experience in engineering prior to medicine I was initially drawn to technical radiotherapy as a research area. However, after being introduced to cell and molecular biology on the MSc course at The Institute of Cancer Research in London I became interested in cancer genomics. The ACF is a fantastic opportunity as it offers you 9 months of paid time to develop technical research skills in any area you choose. Finding places to go is straightforward, as the most difficult element to cover in research – your salary – is covered by the NIHR, with your Deanery back-filling your clinical role. This means you are easy to accommodate within most research settings, although extra funds are sometimes required for equipment or materials etc.

I used my ACF time to gain experience in a lab working on circulating tumour DNA, having had no lab experience whatsoever previously. This sort of experience makes your funding application for a clinical research fellowship (a training programme for clinicians to do a PhD) more competitive, and I was able to secure a fellowship from the Medical Research Council, one of the large national funding bodies. Writing grant applications can be gruelling, but is a good experience for anyone wishing to pursue an academic career.

I am currently in the second year of my PhD and have found that I really enjoy the lab environment. Although the pace is much slower than a clinical role, there is far greater time allowed for considering problems and for analytical thought. I find learning about cancer biology and trying to use that understanding to improve cancer care really rewarding and I would strongly recommend research experience for all oncology trainees. I'd ideally like to follow an academic path in my career, but even if I am unable to realise that ambition I feel that the time I've spent in research will be an enormous advantage in my future practice, and remain a valuable personal experience.