AS THE RIVER FLOWS

More podiatrists are learning from the river and taking their career in unexpected directions. We explore the benefits of getting off the ladder.

Words: Emma Bennett

As people live and work for longer, our careers are changing. Today's young people might expect to work for 60 years – two decades longer than past generations (Castrillon, 2023). Staying in one career and relentlessly climbing the ladder is no longer the norm. Instead, many are considering switching roles or industries, taking their career in unexpected directions. These intentional, sideways moves characterise a growing trend: the non-linear career.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, employee priorities have shifted, with the desire for personal value and purpose competing with salary (Gartner, 2023). How work fits into our lives is also increasingly important: a 2022 survey by workplace pension provider Aviva found that 41% of workers said they were attracted to their current role because of the work/life balance it could offer (Aviva, 2022). Among healthcare workers, three times as many cited the lack of work/life balance as the reason for leaving the NHS in 2021, compared with 10 years earlier (Ocean et al, 2023).

For people who switch careers, 88% say they are happier in their new role (Indeed, 2019). So how can a change in career direction make a positive difference to those working in podiatry? Apart from offering new challenges and opportunities for personal growth, Beverley Durrant, who spent 12 years working as a podiatrist in the NHS, says it gives you control of your future.

Creating your own career

'Having a non-linear career gives you a much broader vision,' Beverley continues. 'You don't know if you want to do something until you've done it, so by taking those chances you're actively involved in creating your own future. I think that's really important – don't let your career happen to you.'

After more than a decade in the NHS for – in clinical leadership, specialising in musculoskeletal podiatry – it was time for a change. Beverley made the leap to an academic career as a senior lecturer at the University of Brighton. She explains: 'I was curious to know what else was out there for me as a trained podiatrist. I really enjoyed the part of my role as a clinical educator, so the university role piqued my interest. It felt like a career change because it was such a different environment, but I was able to take my expertise with me, and develop it further by completing a PhD in clinical biomechanics.'

After leaving the University of Brighton and taking on a hybrid academic role at the University of Salford, Beverley went on to work with what was then Health Education England and the Office for Students. Then in 2021 she combined her clinical, leadership and educational experience by setting up a consultancy business, Vectis Healthcare Solutions. She later co-founded the Creative Health Alliance.

She said the opportunities are out there if you're willing to take a risk: 'A few times I've gone out on a limb, but that has been a key lever in my career journey. It has challenged me to push my boundaries.'

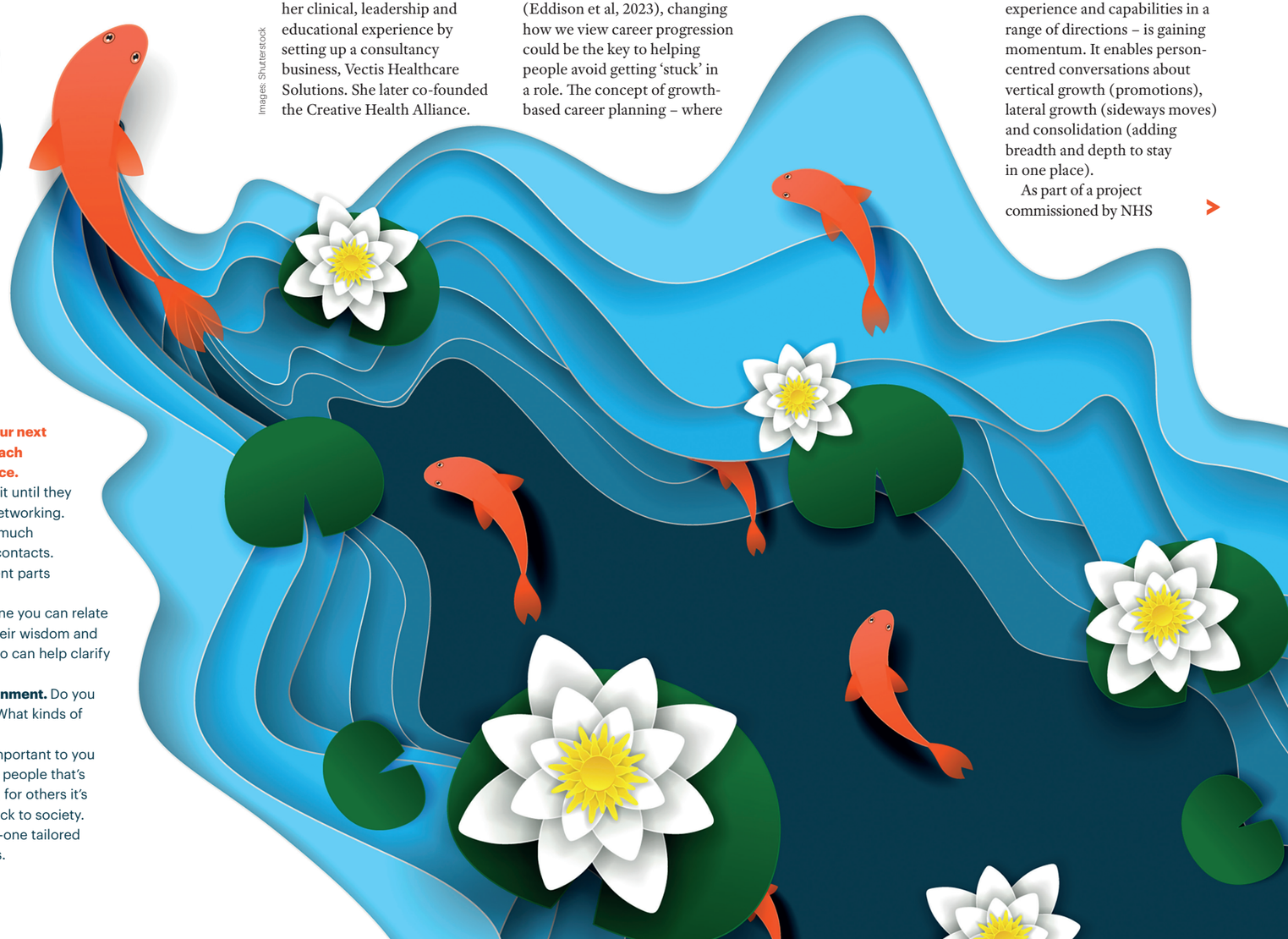
Life is like a river

With a lack of representation among allied health professionals (AHPs) including podiatrists in senior NHS roles (Eddison et al, 2023), changing how we view career progression could be the key to helping people avoid getting 'stuck' in a role. The concept of growth-based career planning – where the focus is on expanding experience and capabilities in a range of directions – is gaining momentum. It enables person-centred conversations about vertical growth (promotions), lateral growth (sideways moves) and consolidation (adding breadth and depth to stay in one place).

As part of a project commissioned by NHS

'Having such a diverse portfolio career has allowed me to explore different scopes of practice and discover what I'm really passionate about'

Fran Campbell



Images: Shutterstock

Making your move



How do you decide what your next step should be? Careers coach Roger Martin gives his advice.

Network. Most people wait until they want to move jobs to start networking. While that's not too late, it's much more helpful to start early and build up those contacts. LinkedIn is a great tool for exploring the different parts of your profession.

Find a mentor. Ideally this should be someone you can relate to and build a rapport with who can pass on their wisdom and experience. Having someone you trust to talk to can help clarify your options.

Think about your preferred working environment. Do you want to work remotely or in a clinical setting? What kinds of people do you want to work with?

Consider your values. Think about what's important to you and what you want from your career. For some people that's earning a bigger salary or having a high status, for others it's work/life balance or having a role that gives back to society.

Talk to a careers coach. We can give one-to-one tailored advice based on your individual circumstances.

Follow your passion



Fran Campbell, clinical lead in podiatry and biomechanics at not-for-profit healthcare provider Accelerate CIC, has developed a portfolio career to suit her changing interests.

I worked in the NHS for about seven years, at Homerton University Hospital in London, where my special interests were rheumatology, biomechanics and paediatrics. While there, I became interested in gait analysis.

I wanted to develop that specialism, so I moved into private practice. Working with podiatric surgeon Mr Ron McCulloch at The London Podiatry Centre, I was able to develop my skills by doing pressure analysis and 3D motion capture. I also got involved in helping to manage surgical patients.

While working in private practice I became the Care Quality Commission manager and clinical manager of the surgical facility. We saw a lot of elite sportsmen and sportswomen – footballers, tennis players, golfers and high-level athletes with sports injuries. But after a few years I started to miss treating patients with long-term conditions. In a sports injury or surgical clinic, the treatment plan is usually very finite: you don't see a lot of patients long-term.

I started looking for roles where I could take my biomechanics knowledge and the management skills I'd developed, and incorporate that with managing patients with long-term conditions. This role came up at Accelerate, where we see patients with leg ulcers and lymphoedema. I'm the only podiatrist working across two teams of nurses, and I have my own clinic two days a week seeing patients from a biomechanics perspective. I work to enhance their mobility, physical activity and overall wellbeing.

I regularly present at medical conferences and run educational workshops about how we can improve mobility for patients who have leg ulcers and lymphoedema. I am on the scientific committee at the British Lymphology Society and have published several peer-reviewed research papers and articles.

I've also just been accepted for a pre-doctoral programme at King's College London, where I hope to undertake novel research in patients with lymphoedema.

Having such a diverse portfolio career has allowed me to explore different scopes of practice and discover what I'm really passionate about. The world is your oyster with this profession: you just have to put yourself out there and be prepared to get out of your comfort zone.

My top tip is to take any opportunity you can to shadow people working in different areas – you can learn so much by visiting other clinics, and it might spark an interest or give you an insight into a different area of our profession.

England (see *Resources*), occupational therapist Dr Stephanie Tempest has been exploring how this approach can support recruitment and retention among AHPs, including by using the Kawa model. She says 'kawa' – Japanese for 'river' – has the potential to help people feel engaged and supported in their journey.

'HCPC data tells us that one in 18 of us are deregistering within four years of starting our careers,' Stephanie says. 'One of the reasons given for this is a lack of career progression, but when you scratch the surface there's a whole other story about people not feeling valued or supported, not knowing there are diverse career opportunities out there, or feeling worried that leaving clinical practice means losing a chunk of their professional identity.

'While the career ladder works for some, it is also potentially part of an oppressive structure that holds us back. So, we need a new narrative based on growth. The Kawa model has its roots in clinical practice, but it has started to gain traction as a coaching tool for professional development. It supports people to think about life as a river with a past, present, future and ending. We can use it to talk about our careers: where we are now, where we're going, and what rocks are in the way.'

RESOURCES

- Find a mentor through the College's mentoring platform: **cop.onpld.com**
- More information about the Kawa model of growth-based career planning: **bit.ly/HEE-growth-based-careers**

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Dr Stephanie Tempest

Stephanie tested the concept of growth-based career planning with 90 early career AHPs; 85% responded positively, saying that now they know about it, they will apply the concept to their own careers in future. 'People are saying they feel liberated by these ideas, and it gives them a sense of agency and control over their own careers,' she says.

She says that the benefits for staff retention are huge: 'If people feel ownership and know they have choices, that is going to be beneficial for wellbeing. A happy workforce is a healthy workforce that contributes to safer and more effective services. If, instead of leaving the profession, people think about growth, they can see that their river is still contributing to the work of the health and care ecosystem.'

Workplace learning

Another way to encourage career development in podiatry is through continuous work-based learning at all levels. Wendy Winpenny, podiatry quality, governance and professional lead for Kent Community Health NHS Foundation Trust, introduced podiatry apprenticeships at her trust to develop Band 3 and 4 podiatry assistants.

Wendy explains: 'We have the most brilliant podiatry assistants within the service, so it seemed like the obvious thing to offer a development programme to them. We pay for them to go to university while working; they are observed in the clinic and offered additional support. It's fantastic.'

Podiatry apprentice Maria Prendergast, who moved into podiatry from a role as a theatre support worker, says the apprenticeship will open up many more career opportunities to her. 'I had been working as a podiatry assistant for a while and was starting to wonder what was next. Doing the apprenticeship means I can apply for a Band 5 position and go into a special interest such as wound care, MSK or nail surgery. It's made a real difference.'

Pick and mix careers

For others wondering, 'What's next?', a portfolio career with multiple jobs and employers within one or more professions can offer a solution. Stephanie says: 'This idea that you might work with patients for two days a week and then work in, say, academia or research for the rest of the week can help avoid burnout and encourage you to stay in the NHS or private practice for longer.

'It's great for employers too. By allowing your people to grow somewhere else they can develop a whole new set of knowledge and skills to bring back and benefit the organisation.'

Fran Campbell – whose own career has spanned the NHS and private practice, from rheumatology to gait analysis and surgery (see *Follow your passion,* left) – agrees that diversifying benefits professionals and patients.

She is now a lead in podiatry and biomechanics at not-for-profit social enterprise healthcare provider Accelerate CIC. 'Working across different services with other healthcare professionals puts you out of your comfort zone and allows you to explore different areas of practice,' Fran says. 'That then gives you more confidence and experience to manage patients. We see very complex patients who present with multiple conditions. Working with so many different teams – rheumatology, physiotherapy, paediatrics – enhances your practice because you understand what each specialism can do for that patient, meaning you're more likely to refer patients on.'

For some, taking a career sidestep can feel daunting, with the fear of the unknown having a paralysing effect. But Beverley says there's no pressure to make a drastic change. 'Don't limit yourself to thinking you have to do something full time for it to be worthwhile. If you're working in a clinical role and you're interested in education, try contacting local universities to see if their students would benefit from you doing hourly paid lectures, for example.

'That's a good way of dipping your toe in the water while maintaining your clinical career. Similarly, if you're interested in research you can follow a clinical academic career. If you take a wider lens and look at the whole podiatry landscape, you can make your career your own. The opportunities are endless.'

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Dr Beverley Durrant