

## **Diane Foster**

Deputy Administrator and Principal Assistant, Gurdon Institute

*Interviewed by Marie Synakewicz*

There are some situations in life that can hit like a freight train and totally throw us off-track. When circumstances are truly unexpected we often cannot think logically anymore, are put under a lot of emotional and physical stress while still having to somehow earn money. In those situations it is of great help to have a team and a line manager that are fully supportive and can keep a clear head for you.

Diane has been working for the University for 30 years and has been employed by the Gurdon Institute for 25 of those years. She has a wide range of responsibilities, including making sure that equipment is functional, departmental services are running smoothly and providing administrative support to researchers. A few years ago, Diane very suddenly found herself with caring responsibilities for her 15 year old daughter who had developed mental health difficulties. Due to various reasons, Diane had to stay at home with her daughter, taking a prolonged period of sick leave. The situation was very stressful for her and she sought help from the University's Occupational Health Service, amongst others. During that time, the rest of the administrative team took on as much of her essential duties as they could. However, some tasks could not be covered. Diane, knowing of this, felt as if she was letting her team down and at some point considered handing in her notice to free up her position. Fortunately, her line manager disagreed and did everything in her power to give Diane the space and time to sort out the problems at home before she could come back on a flexible basis.

After about 8 months of sick-leave, Diane started to work from home for 6 weeks in 2008 on a part-time basis. This enabled her to get back into a routine slowly by doing some of the duties remotely that colleagues had been covering for her. The IT group of the Institute set her up with a home office and remote access. Hence, even after she came back to the office part-time, she could still work remotely if she had to go home for emergencies. Little details like having a parking spot at the department allowed her to adapt to the circumstances. More importantly, if she was able to work longer hours, she was paid over-time which partially reduced the impact working part-time had on her family's finances. Diane worked mornings only at first, before increasing her hours gradually until a good balance was reached. In 2012, Diane was able to return full-time. These days, if issues should arise, she can manage them by taking annual leave or by making up the lost hours at a later time.

Both of her daughters are now living away from home and although she and her husband are missing them, they do enjoy having the house to themselves. Looking back, she says that the whole family was under a massive amount of strain and that they actually managed very well to cope. The situation made her realize how much her job contributes to her self-esteem and purpose. She says, "If I had given up, I probably would not be as happy and as well as I am now."