

Zarah Abdullahi

Senior Research Nurse and Research Study Coordinator, MRC Cancer Unit

Interviewed by Marie Synakewicz

The job of a Senior Research Nurse comes with its own perks and difficulties. Although the salary is on a clinical scale and therefore gives more financial security than other research positions, Zarah's responsibilities involve a lot of direct patient contact. On paper Zarah's working hours are described as 9.30am to 5.30pm, four days a week. However, due to the nature of the work she can only leave once patients are finished with their tests and treatments and "leaving at 6pm is a privilege", she says.

For eight years, Zarah has been part of a group of about 17 researchers, nurses and graduate students who investigate gastro-oesophageal cancer and manage the Barrett's surveillance service at the hospital. She and the other nurses have tasks within both the clinical and the research side of the group. They are the main medium by which science from the bench is translated into practice at the bedside. Additionally, each nurse is responsible for a few of the around 20 ongoing studies, although they are all working together and can help each other out whenever possible. Her background in human anatomy (BSc) and neurosciences (MSc), although not required for the job, has proven to be invaluable for her work in clinical research.

Her position had been advertised as part-time which suited Zarah, a single mother of two children, well. At that time her youngest child was only two and a half years old. After some years in the group she had acquired so many responsibilities and the group are so supportive that meetings were scheduled around her day off where possible. In the mornings she had enough time to drop off her daughter at nursery, but the long working hours in the evening posed a problem. Zarah employed a childminder who picked up her daughter from nursery, and later from school. If required the childminder could keep her daughter until later in the evening. Zarah's son, who was much older, helped a lot at home. At some point it also became one of his duties to pick up his sister from the childminder at 6pm, as fees doubled for late evenings. Once her son left for college, it would not have been possible for Zarah to work late as she could not afford the later hour fees. Fortunately, due to their long-term relationship she and the childminder could come to an agreement where the childminder would reduce her fees and Zarah helped her out in return, e.g. if she or her children needed driving somewhere. In emergency situations the nurses could cover each other's responsibilities, which was only possible because they worked so closely together. While a few years ago Zarah was a main beneficiary, she can now cover for other nurses more often and can thereby return the favours.

At the moment, Zarah is happy with her working arrangements. The one day off every week provides her with time for herself, away from the busy job. Hence, she would not extend her hours, even if she could. On these days she can also do the ever present housework which frees up weekends, e.g. to volunteer in the Islamic school in her community. For some time Zarah used her days off to obtain another MSc degree in Clinical Research, which she enrolled for part-time with Hertfordshire University. Her place was funded by an NIHR grant which enabled her to get additional study days from work as well. One of her future goals is to earn a PhD to be able to teach – although the exact details are in the process of being defined.