

Lynnsey Willcox is a Gynae/Oncology Clinical Nurse Specialist (CSN), for University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust. Lynnsey is based at Furness General Hospital and supports Oncology clinics every Thursday at Westmorland General Hospital (WGH). Lynnsey works with colleague Vicky Slinger, Gynae/Oncology CNS for Royal Lancaster Infirmary and WGH to ensure patients are fully supported.



The small team has recently appointed Julie Smith, Cancer Support Worker, who leads the self-supported management follow-up programme which empowers patients to look out for worrying signs of reoccurrence. Patients can call Julie with any problems or queries.

What experience did you need to obtain your role?

I started my career as a surgical nurse working for the elective orthopaedic unit. I then went on to pre-op assessment. Patients who had been diagnosed with cancer and that were booked for operations within the Trust would need to have a pre-op assessment. It was during this point in my career, that I became interested in specialist nursing. During these pre-ops, patients would open up to me about their worries and concerns and I found that I could communicate in a manner that put them almost at ease and they would thank me for taking the time to listen. When the position was advertised, I applied with not a lot of experience in working with cancer. Since being successful in this role, I have completed my nursing degree focusing on modules to help gain knowledge in cancer and oncology nursing. I have also completed my prescribing course and consultation and physical assessment module which helps me to carry out my role to the best of my ability.

What does your role involve?

As clinical nurse specialists, we are there to support patients from diagnosis to treatment. This involves psychological, financial, emotional, and physical issues. I ensure all tests like Computerised Tomography (CT) scans, Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scans, and blood tests are done timely to ensure the smooth transition from diagnosis to treatment. This could be surgical or oncology treatment - chemotherapy or radiotherapy. I work with the gynaecologists and also the oncologists so it is busy but we ensure all of our patients are fully supported. I also have my nurse-led clinics which are either telephone or face-to-face cancer follow-ups. Ladies that have had their treatment are then followed up in gynaecology. I am a nurse prescriber and have also completed my consultation and physical assessment module at university to ensure I am fully qualified to see my patients.

What have been the best bits and challenges of your role?

I thoroughly love what I do. I do love giving good news after scans or discharging patients after five years of follow-ups but there is also so much sadness in my role. We are looked after with clinical supervision which helps us to deliver the best care even at the hardest times. The importance of ladies going to their GP if they are worried about any gynaecology symptoms is key. The earlier we can diagnose cancer, the best outcomes for curative treatment are met. Also having regular smears from the age of 25 is so important to help prevent cervical cancer from forming. We can detect cell abnormalities before they turn cancerous, therefore having smear tests is vital for all young ladies.

The challenges are there is not enough time in the day. The role can be so busy at times. I do work well with my colleagues and we work together to give our ladies the best support when they need it. I do find it difficult to switch off sometimes and the psychological impact of the job can sometimes be hard but I do have great peer support. COVID has had an impact on my role and has meant we have had to change a lot of the face-to-face follow-ups to telephone clinics which was strange at first but over the pandemic, our patients have adapted and prefer the telephone consultations which is great.

Top tips for people wanting to become a Clinical Nurse Specialist:

My top tip would be to go for it. I did and I have never looked back. There is a vast amount of learning and skills needed for the position but gaining them increases knowledge which in turn gives the patients the best holistic support and service. It is a difficult role but also a rewarding role.