

Career profile:

Jane Philpott

Jane Philpott, MA(Oxon), MSc, PhD tells us how she became a Nutrition Consultant

“When I grow up, I want to solve the world food problem” I announced at the age of ten, my young soul stirred by the heart-rending images of the famine in Ethiopia.

At school I studied diligently and emerged with the results I needed for entrance to the University of Oxford to read Biological Sciences, where I specialised in agriculture. Step one of my grand plan was to learn how crops and livestock are produced. Plant science became my passion and after graduating I moved to Imperial College London to pursue an MSc in Crop Protection. Here I discovered the problems of growing crops on a large scale, particularly in the tropics, where weeds, insects and diseases are rampant. I was also introduced to the wonders of scientific research. My MSc thesis focused on the biology and control of a tropical perennial grass called *Imperata cylindrica*.

Whilst completing my MSc, an advert appeared for a PhD position funded by the UK Overseas Development Administration. The aim was to identify cost-effective means of controlling *Imperata cylindrica* so that small farmers in Indonesia could clear the land for cultivation. I applied and was offered the position at Bristol University. My research was initially laboratory based and focused on the physiology of herbicide action in *I. cylindrica*. It soon became apparent that fieldwork was necessary. I found myself miles from civilisation in

Sumatra. With the help of many local people, I completed my fieldwork and returned to the UK to write my PhD thesis.

Now I had to think about the next stage of my grand plan to solve the world food problem - to find a job in overseas development. One day, I heard someone talking about his work for an aid organisation in Africa, breeding camels and running rural development programmes. My ears pricked up. It transpired that he had come back to the UK to obtain a degree in Environmental Science and was going on to do an MA in Rural Development. The rest, as they say, is history. A year later, Paul and I were married.

My plan to work overseas after my PhD was suspended as Paul was studying in the UK, so I decided to find a temporary job. During my PhD, the chemical company ICI approached me to ask if I would work for them in research at their Plant Protection Division in Berkshire. Initially I was unsure, believing in my youthful ignorance that industry would require me to relinquish my values, but I agreed to a one-year contract.

My prejudices proved entirely unfounded. I loved my job at ICI. My colleagues were highly intelligent, motivated and fun, and the work was stimulating and intellectually challenging. After six months, they offered me a permanent contract. By this time, Paul had finished his MA and been offered a one-year

posting in Somalia. A fierce war was raging there, so we decided that I would stay at ICI. I gained experience in different research teams before being promoted to Leader of the Physiology Team. From there, I became a Group Leader, responsible for the research of a larger number of scientists. Our aim was to invent products for use in improving crop yields in global agriculture.

Through various international demergers and mergers, ICI became Zeneca, then AstraZeneca. I became Head of Biological Research. After another merger, a new company formed called Syngenta, one of the world's largest agribusinesses. I became Head of Bioscience Research for the company, which has 24,000 employees in over 90 countries.

Syngenta's mission is to help farmers feed the world. The technology solutions that such companies have provided, in collaboration with universities and research institutes, have led to astonishing advances in global food production. Between 1950 and 1985, world food output increased more rapidly than did world population, allowing production of an average of 1 kg food per person per day. On the

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face of it, the world food problem had been addressed. The reality is that this food is not evenly distributed and not everyone can afford it. Furthermore, the world's population is projected to increase by 34% to 9 billion by 2050, requiring another 70% increase in food production.

Global statistics for 2009 estimate there are now 1.02 billion undernourished people, with over three million children dying each year from malnutrition. Whilst, at the same time, 1.5 billion adults worldwide are overweight and 525 million are obese. In the USA, obesity has now overtaken smoking as the primary cause of death. The world food problem is no longer just about poverty and lack of food, it is also about affluence and excess of food.

The birth of our children prompted radical changes. We were both travelling extensively and this was not conducive to raising a family. Despite loving what we did, we both decided to leave to seek a better quality family life. Paul was appointed as a Rural Development Advisor in Somerset, so we moved, and I began studying part-time for a BSc in Nutrition, intrigued by the effects of modern food production on human health. When the children started school,



I also became a Non-Executive Director of an NHS trust.

So now I work in nutrition and healthcare. I provide professional consultancy and training for local authorities, NHS trusts, catering businesses, schools and colleges. Currently, I am involved in a project with local councils aimed at improving the nutritional quality of children's menus in independent catering businesses, funded by the Food Standards Agency. I was also responsible for implementing an in-house hot lunch service in a Somerset primary school, so have expertise in children's nutrition, school food standards, food hygiene legislation and other aspects of running a catering business.

In 2008, I founded the popular Cooking for Health Cookery School, which offers practical cookery tuition and teaching on the links between diet and health. I also see individuals for personal consultations on how to transform health and well-being through implementing changes to diet and lifestyle. In addition I write articles for various publications related to food, nutrition and health and I lecture to undergraduates.

What of the future? In addition to building on my current activities, my ambition is to write a series of books on nutrition and health and maybe one day we will fulfil our dream of living and working overseas together.