

Q&A with Paula Moynihan



Paula Moynihan is Professor of Nutrition and Oral Health and Director of the Centre for Oral Health Research at Newcastle University. She is currently involved in the LiveWell Programme, a multi-disciplinary project looking at interventions to promote healthy ageing in later life.

How has your research focus changed throughout your career?

My first research grant was from the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Foods for a critical appraisal to measure non-milk extrinsic sugars in food. I was later appointed as lecturer of nutrition in the School of Dental Sciences at Newcastle University with a broad focus on oral health in children and adults. I have narrowed my research focus since then to eating and well-being in older people – I'm specifically interested in nutrition interventions among this group.

How has receiving a cross-Council award influenced your career trajectory?

Cross-disciplinary research has been a positive experience for me. I received a grant under the first cross-Council ageing programme, New Dynamics of Ageing (NDA), which was my first experience of leading a multi-centre study. It taught me a lot about how to lead and manage a team. I realised that I enjoyed this type of role, and later took on a leadership position as Director of the Centre for Oral Health Research at Newcastle University. Running Patient and Public Involvement events for NDA also encouraged me to think for the first time about research with impact, rather than just academic outputs.

The nature of the NDA and LLHW programmes is highly interdisciplinary. What effect has this had on your work?

The interdisciplinary nature of the NDA award took some time to get used to. I quickly learned that the things you say can be interpreted very differently by people from other disciplines. For example, the terms 'food intake' and 'nutrient intake' have separate meanings for a nutritionist or dietician. But to designers, they mean the same thing. Working in an interdisciplinary way has helped me to be aware of the nuances of different disciplines, and the fact that they may have different priorities and judge outputs in different ways. It has also allowed me to build up valuable contacts and links. My links to the NDA design and computing team, for example, led to further interdisciplinary projects for Lifelong Health and Wellbeing (LLHW).

Can you describe the wider impact that cross-Council funding has had?

We are currently talking to companies regarding a prototype to change food provision in hospitals. This was borne out of the NDA programme. We have also launched the website, www.hospitalfoodie.com, to provide a narrative of the prototype as it would work in practice. There's a five-minute video clip which distils the core output of the project. The site has had hits from around the world, and we've received a good response from companies who have used the site to get in touch with us.