

# Your future in STEM: A-Z

Where might **science** take you?

## Please can you introduce yourself and tell us a bit about your job?

My name is Niamh and I'm a physiotherapist within an NHS inpatient rehabilitation unit. Patients are transferred to us from acute hospitals following admissions for a range of problems including falls, surgeries and acquired weakness following long medical admissions. I work closely with occupational therapists, nurses, rehabilitation assistants and doctors to help patients physically recover or adjust so that, where possible, they can return to their previous level of function.

A usual day often starts with a short team meeting in which we identify goals and targets for the patient and make a plan of what ideally needs to be achieved that day. I then spend most of the day working alongside each patient in their individual therapy sessions, often with colleagues such as rehab assistants. It is not uncommon for patients to require two people just to sit up from the bed. We work on building up a patient's strength and confidence so they can return to being able to do the activities of daily life that are important to them, such as walking, or getting outside again. This can often require the use of specialist equipment and adaptations such as standing hoists to reach these goals.



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**Physiotherapist**

As patients improve, we can start a discharge plan by working with occupational therapists to identify and arrange equipment, carers or additional support for them at home. I also work closely with colleagues in the community or outpatients, referring and arranging further rehabilitations where appropriate.

## How did you get into this line of work?

I always knew I wouldn't be suited to a desk based role and I loved biology at school, in particular anatomy. I looked into different healthcare roles such as speech and language therapy but physiotherapy always appealed the most. I arranged some work experience shadowing physiotherapists in a range of settings in my local hospital and by the end of the first day I was confident it was what I wanted to pursue this career.



## What qualifications did you study, or what experience did you gather to enable you to become a physiotherapist?

To study physiotherapy at most universities, an A level in biology is required. It's also advised to try and get some shadowing experience with physiotherapists so you can convey in your university interview that you know what the role can entail and how diverse it is. I emailed every hospital around me to enquire about this and some had several month waiting lists, but I did manage to get some in the end! The university degree itself included 1,000 hours of clinical placement too in a range of clinical settings.

## Are there any particular science practical's, teachers or other moments in school you fondly remember to this day?

I distinctly remember completing the dissection of a mammalian (sheep) heart and lungs in and being fascinated at how intricate and well-designed it all was.



## Were there any moments or events that inspired you and led you down this path, either as a child, a student or since entering work?

I had some amazing clinical educators as a student who really inspired me through their style of practice and manner with patients. Working alongside specialist physiotherapists now who have such in-depth knowledge in their field inspires me to continue to study and keep up with latest research and gold standard practices so I can provide the best care to my patients too.

## Were there any people who inspired you into physiotherapy?

I have older cousins who work in healthcare roles such as radiography and medicine. Listening to them talk about their passion for their job and interesting experiences or anecdotes encouraged me to explore healthcare roles.

## How has your line of work changed to when you first started as a physiotherapist to now?

Patient numbers increase year on year, and we are constantly adapting and improving our services to meet the demand. For example, most teams have now moved to, or are moving towards seven day working with more flexible shift patterns.

Evidence is showing the need for physiotherapists in every part of the hospital so it's now standard that you will find physiotherapists in areas such as A+E. Covid-19 only amplified this, as more people are now aware of the important roles of respiratory physiotherapists in ITU. With an ageing population and the patient complexity increasing, demand on physiotherapists is only going to continue to grow.





## How has studying Science at school prepared you to be become a successful physiotherapist?

An in depth knowledge of human anatomy and physiology is essential for working as a physiotherapist so studying this in biology was vital and lay the foundations for building on this knowledge in the future.

## Were there any obstacles or factors that put you off this route at any point?

No not really, I knew it was a competitive course to get on to, but just went in with the attitude that if I didn't try and give it my best shot I wouldn't ever know.

## What advice would you give to someone thinking about going into the same line of work as you?

As with all jobs, working in healthcare has its challenges, however, with a vocational career like this, I really feel I make a difference in people's lives and I do have a high job satisfaction. Physiotherapists work in so many different areas from clinical practice to research so there are so many different pathways within the career which keeps it exciting.

## What advice would you give to others thinking about a career in STEM?

It's such a diverse and exciting sector, it's constantly changing and advancing with new research. It's sought after as it gives you so many transferable skills too so opens up a lot of opportunities

## What is the reaction from friends and family when you shared your desire to become a physiotherapist?

Very positive and I was always supported. Four years after qualifying I'm still explaining to family and friends that physiotherapy is a very diverse career and not just someone on the side of a pitch with a 'magic sponge' or someone who treats back pain and sports injuries.

One of the best things about my role is that it's rotational so I move to a new team every few months in order to gain experience and upskill. I have worked in a number of teams ranging from ITU, community, oncology, A+E and neurology which always seems to surprise people.



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