

Your future in STEM: A-Z

Where might **science** take you?



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

My name is Tom and I'm an audiologist in the NHS. I'm based in a hospital for Manchester, where our team assess and treat a wide range of hearing and balance disorders. I'm currently in my first year of the scientist training programme (STP), where I'm training to become a clinical scientist in audiology.

There are several areas to audiology, including some you might not expect such as balance or tinnitus. As part of my scheme, I work in all of them, and so my days can vary quite a lot – one day I might be testing a child's hearing, the next helping to treat a patient's dizziness, or fitting a hearing aid. Every day involves meeting a variety of patients, working out their specific needs, and devising a solution with the patient that suits them best.

Audiology is a field that is rapidly advancing. As technology

develops, hearing aids get smaller and smarter. For example, nowadays, some can connect to your phone and adjust themselves automatically based on your environment. As an audiologist, it's important to stay on top of these new advances, as they may benefit my patients.

How did you get into this line of work?

I was always interested in science at school but never knew what direction it was going to take me in. I discovered audiology by chance when I heard about a job covering maternity leave in a Paediatric Audiology department. I had barely heard of audiology at the time, but I was surprised at how much I enjoyed it. Working in healthcare made me feel like I was making a difference to people's lives, and I found the science interesting. After that job, I got a similar position in London, before securing my

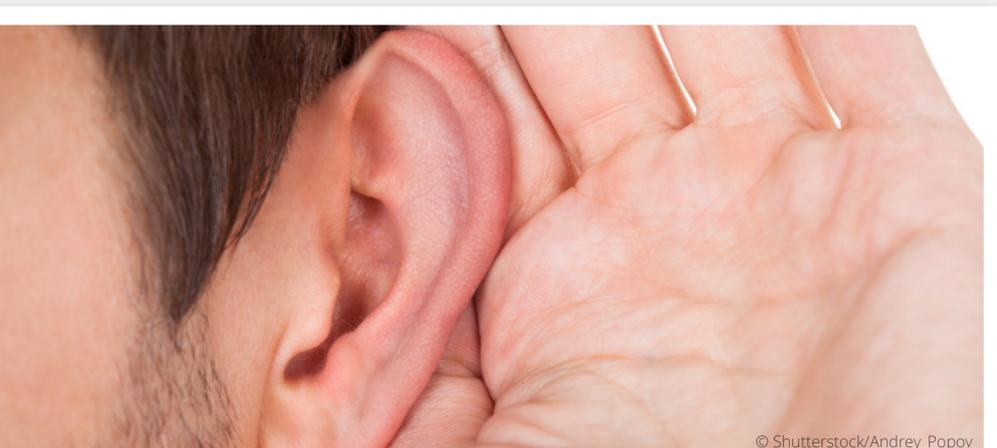
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Audiologist

place on the STP and moving to Manchester.

What qualifications did you study, or what experience did you gather to enable you to become an audiologist?

The most common path to becoming an audiologist is to do an undergraduate degree in audiology. If I had known I wanted to be an audiologist when leaving school, this is probably the path I would have taken. However, I took a slightly different route. After leaving school I completed a biology undergraduate degree at the University of Manchester and later joined the STP. This is a 3-year scheme that involves working and learning in an Audiology department, whilst completing a part-time master's degree in clinical science (audiology).



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How has the pandemic changed your everyday tasks?

Our department has been running throughout lockdown, but COVID-19 has dramatically changed how we operate. The most obvious change is that for the first few months of lockdown we didn't see any patients face to face, and instead moved to phone/video calls. Doing an appointment on the phone certainly has its challenges, especially if a patient has severe hearing loss and struggles to hear the phone. Doing this enabled us to carry on some elements of the service, although we have not been able to do hearing tests remotely as they wouldn't be accurate.

We have now started to see some patients again, whilst



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wearing PPE, although, only in relatively small numbers. The use of facemasks has made communication harder as many hearing aid users rely on lipreading. Clear masks have been developed to help with this, but at time of writing they are yet to be approved for use in UK hospitals.

Are there any science practicals, teachers, or other moments in schools you fondly remember to this day?

I'm quite a hands-on kind of guy, so practical work caught my attention. I remember being amazed when I first saw a cell under a microscope, it was like looking into a hidden world. I was fascinated by its complexity, if something I couldn't even see was this complicated, how complicated must the human body be?

The teacher that had the biggest effect on me was probably my

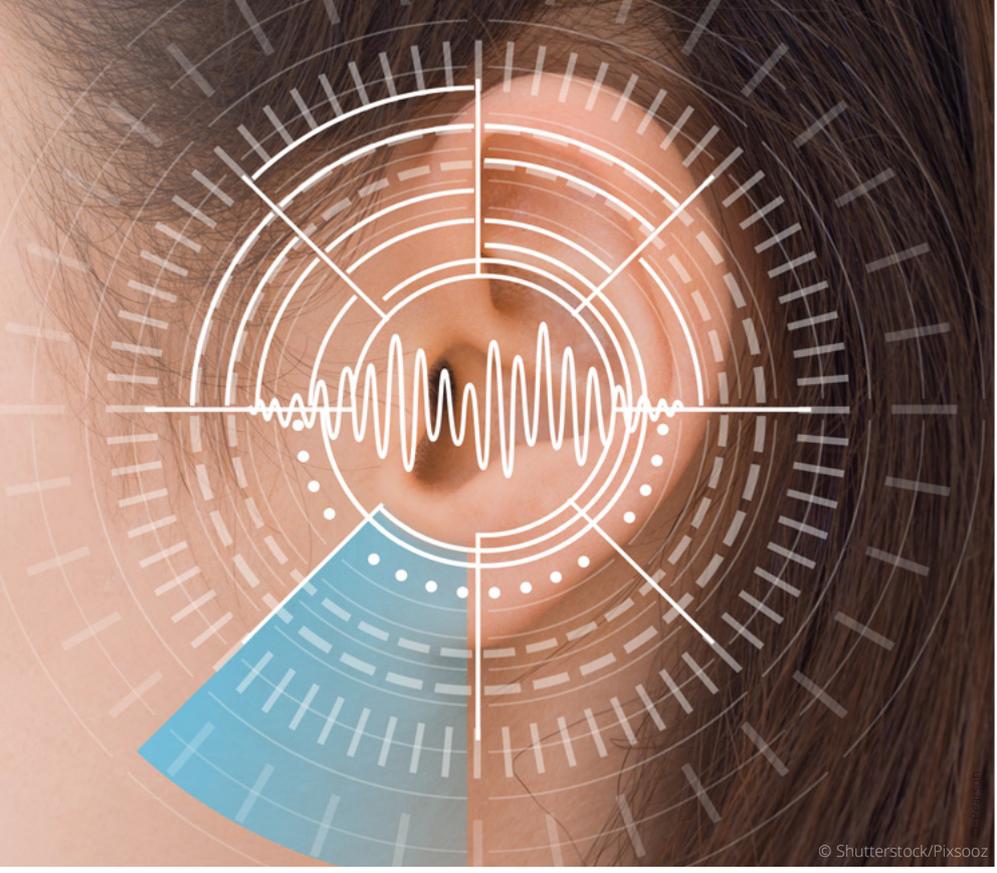
sixth form biology teacher. He had a way of describing things that just made sense to me. He was also happy to chat about biological topics off the syllabus, which helped to foster my interest in biology.

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?

Early in my career at the Paediatric Audiology centre – I distinctly remember one teenager who had a hearing loss but had never had hearing aids. She seemed emotional while we were going through the process of fitting a pair of hearing aids. After the fitting, she began to cry with happiness – she realised she'd never heard properly ▶



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audiology nearly stopped my career before it started. I was lucky that my first audiology experience was in a Paediatric clinic, as this opened my eyes to the fact that hearing aids are not just for the elderly – they can make a huge difference for younger people too.

After I had decided to pursue audiology, I had a setback when my first application onto the STP course wasn't successful. This was a big knock at the time, however, it led to me taking another assistant role in London, before successfully getting on the STP the following year. Looking back, the experience I gained in that busy London clinic was well worth delaying the course for a year, and I'm glad it happened the way it did.

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

If you're interested in a job working in science but still want to work with people, audiology could be right for you. I'd advise contacting a local Audiology department, they may be willing to show you around and answer any questions you have about the job. ►

before and was overcome at the difference they made.

Another example that comes to mind is of a young child who was shy and very reserved before fitting her hearing aids. I saw her 6 months later, being able to hear her peers had made her much more outgoing and confident. These two examples showed me just how important hearing aids are, especially to a child.

Were there any people who has inspired you into this line of work?

It was my first boss who got me interested in a career in audiology. He was supportive of my learning and pushed me towards the STP. He was always willing to offer guidance and read through my application. I'm grateful for that, as without him I'm not sure I'd be where I am today.

I've also met various other audiologists along the way who

go above and beyond for their patients. Fundamentally, that's how I want to be too.

How has studying science at school prepared you to be become an audiologist?

Studying science at school allowed me to learn the basics in a range of fields. This knowledge was vital to be able to build on at university and beyond. Perhaps most importantly, it taught me the scientific processes and inspired a general passion for science.

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

I think when most people think of audiology, they think of their grandma's chunky hearing aid that was always squeaking. That was certainly my impression before I started, and that view of



There are a few different areas in audiology, for example, audiologists can work exclusively in a Paediatric department or in a surgical role offering cochlear implants. There is also the scope to split time between being in the clinic and teaching at university. Each requires a different skillset, so investigate the different areas, and see what catches your interest.

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

If you enjoy STEM subjects, then it's likely you'll enjoy a career in them too. Take some time to explore areas of STEM, you might find a job you love that you never knew existed.

On the other hand, don't feel like you necessarily need to decide your career path right now. Doing a more general STEM degree can give you more time to think and open many doors for you down the line.



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