

Dr Deborah Turner

Medically Qualified Member Appeal Tribunals

Professional Background

Dr Turner qualified in 1985 at Queens University Belfast and commenced as a Forensic Medical Officer 1989 as well as training as a GP, completing training in 1990. In 1994 an opportunity arose to join one of the Trusts as an Occupational Health Practitioner and Dr Turner subsequently underwent specialist training in this role and obtained Membership of the Faculty of Occupational Medicine. Dr Turner started with the Tribunal Appeal Service (TAS) in 2006.

Qualifications: MB BCH BAO DCH DRCOG MRCGP MFOM

What attracted you to apply for the role?

I always wanted to go into general practice, but I ended up opting into occupational health which I found thoroughly enjoyed. At the time of application, I was also working as a Forensic Medical Officer alongside my occupational health role, which gave me an insight into working as a medical professional within the legal system. As part of that role I was required to prepare and give evidence in court, and when the Medically Qualified Member role in the Appeal Tribunals came about I thought my previous experience would assist me very well in this new role and I would be able to provide some value to the panel based on my experience providing evidence in court and with a general practitioner and occupational health background.

What is a typical day like as a Legally Qualified Member?

Tribunals are generally split into morning and afternoon sessions, each lasting between approximately 2plus hours. Morning sessions will begin at 10am, so the panel members arrive at around 9.30-9.45am. Afternoon hearings will start at 2pm so we arrive at 1.30-1.45pm. With Disabled Living Allowance and Personal Injury Payment hearings I will arrive earlier, as they typically require more reading and preparation than with other hearings. Sometimes you will be required to travel quite significant distances so that will need to be factored in the evening before.

Preparation for hearings can take anywhere from 2-4 hours depending on the volume of reports and documentation you need to familiarise yourself with prior to the hearing. Typically, you will receive the paperwork a fortnight beforehand so you have time to schedule reading time in beforehand.

What are the biggest challenges you face in the role?

Initially I found the greatest challenge was to try to avoid giving advice or leading the questioning as you would in a medical consultation. However, with time I have developed ways of questioning that allows me to gain valuable information without asking leading questions. I tend to use my questioning in a much more general way to tease out information without influencing the person in any way. Often you will need to take a different line of

questioning to suit the person's condition. For instance, people with autism or specific ailments that impact their ability to communicate clearly will require a different method of questioning in order to get a more accurate answer. Typically, I have found that a good chair will manage the room well, and provide structure to the hearing to ensure the individual is enabled to be heard and to give their own account of their health problems and their impact. The chair can also intervene to minimise interruptions or comments from family members if they seem to be interfering with the judicial process.

Another challenge would be making sure that the person feels at ease so they can then talk freely about their conditions so I try to create a safe atmosphere in the best way I can. I think this is where your skills as a clinician come into the fore; speaking slowly and clearly, trying to maintain good eye contact and encouraging individuals all help to assist them in putting across their information. Maintaining an air of calm can often help to defuse potentially tricky moments.

Which aspects of your professional experience have proven most useful when carrying out judicial duties?

I think I was uniquely positioned with my experience in occupational health, in that I regularly assess functional ability and consider how work places and tasks can be structured to help someone get back to work. This can be extrapolated into tasks that a person requires on a daily basis to function. In addition, my previous and current job roles have also been beneficial as I am familiar with assessing when an individual may be under or over emphasising their functional abilities.

Additionally, I think my time as a Forensic Medical Officer helped with my transition because it gave me previous courtroom experience.

Is the job what you imagined it would be?

We get extensive training once appointed to ensure that we are prepared, and training is ongoing at regular intervals so, yes, it has been as I imagined and expected.

Is there anything you wish you had known before applying?

Not really. I came into the role quite prepared in terms of professional and life experience.

Would you recommend a judicial role to others?

Absolutely. I feel that it is incredibly important we use our skills as doctors to help as many people as possible. I have gained a lot from my role both professionally and personally – I enjoy the contact with my fellow panel members and find the work to be very interesting and rewarding.

I like the fact that as panel members we discuss and weigh up the evidence and bring our own skills and background to the decision, and from my experience panel members have always been incredibly supportive of one another.

Do you have any advice for those considering applying for judicial appointment?

Apply today – it is a very rewarding area of medicine, and it has certainly helped me in many aspects of my day to day work. I also think tribunal work is a very sensible option for those wanting to develop a portfolio career because you have to keep upskilling.

Furthermore, I think that if you come from a mental health or occupational health background then that will serve you well in the role. Having said that, any experience that allows for having a broader base of knowledge and greater familiarity with assessing how a medical condition can affect an individual in all aspects of their life would be beneficial.

I would encourage people to apply when they see such opportunities being advertised. You don't have to commit huge amounts of time, I have a flexible career and commit to 1 session a week, but sometimes more and sometimes less so it does offer a great deal of flexibility whilst also allowing you to do something interesting.

The role is not without its challenges – however that is part of its allure and charm. For instance, sometimes a new medical condition will come up and it will prompt me to look up the textbooks so I do find myself constantly upskilling - something I am used to as a clinician.