

# Garreth Burke

Specialist Forensic Dietitian



## My route into Forensics

My journey into forensics was unexpected as I never really thought I wanted to work as a clinical dietitian. After my undergraduate at Ulster University in Northern Ireland, I completed an MSc in Sport & Exercise Nutrition. After this, I moved to Australia with the intention of building up experience with one of their many professional sports teams. Then COVID happened, so I couldn't become accredited as a dietitian as applications were put on hold. I ended up working in many different areas like agriculture (picking avocados!), construction & the removalist industry, before moving back to the UK, where my plan was to continue working in locum posts full-time & sports nutrition part-time until an opportunity came to do sports nutrition work full-time. I was taking different locum posts across the UK before taking my first forensics job for Oxleas in London. It was a completely new experience, one with a unique patient group, a challenging mixture of clinical & service development work & an opportunity to work with independence & lateral thinking. In October '22, I started a permanent job in forensics with Oxford Health. I've always had a strong interest in psychology & mental illness – my mother trained as a counsellor & my father has schizophrenia – so immediately I felt as if I was doing meaningful work when I found forensics.

## A closer look at my role

I work as a specialist forensic dietitian for Oxford Health NHS FT. I've worked in forensics for nearly 3 years now & 4 years as a dietitian overall. The term 'forensics' always gets a lot of attention, and not many people are aware of what it actually means (I wasn't before I first started here!). It refers to 'forensic mental health services' – services that provide assessment, treatment & risk management of people with a mental disorder who have some involvement with the law. Usually, they will have committed a crime when mentally ill or become mentally ill in prison, before being sent to us for rehabilitation.

The role of a dietitian in forensics mainly revolves around the physical health of the patients, where a wide range of dietetic issues present themselves. Obesity, rapid weight gain & type 2 diabetes are the most common, although we see a lot of malnutrition through self-neglect as well as disordered eating & gastro cases.

Forensic dietitians will be familiar with the physical health inequalities our patient experience, alongside the difficulties they have with behaviour change, especially with the negative symptoms that schizophrenia brings. Communication skills are very important here as you have to pitch to people of a wide range of intellectual abilities, from the MDT to people with autism to those with LD & others. A knowledge of behaviour change skills also helps massively.

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## What does a typical day look like within your role?

I work full-time and my role involved both clinical and non-clinical responsibilities. There is huge variety in my day-to-day work and no one day in this job has been in any way dull or boring!

Clinically, I see patients 1:1 and sometimes via group. I may only see 2-4 patients per day as they may require additional time. My patient sessions are always bespoke and my approach is tailored to the needs of the individual. Sessions can take the form of a walk around the grounds, a grocery shop tour or even a game of pool to build rapport if someone is not comfortable with a 1:1 session. Our patients are long-term stays – months to decades between institutions – you get to build up strong relationships with them & get to know them as people, which makes the work very rewarding.

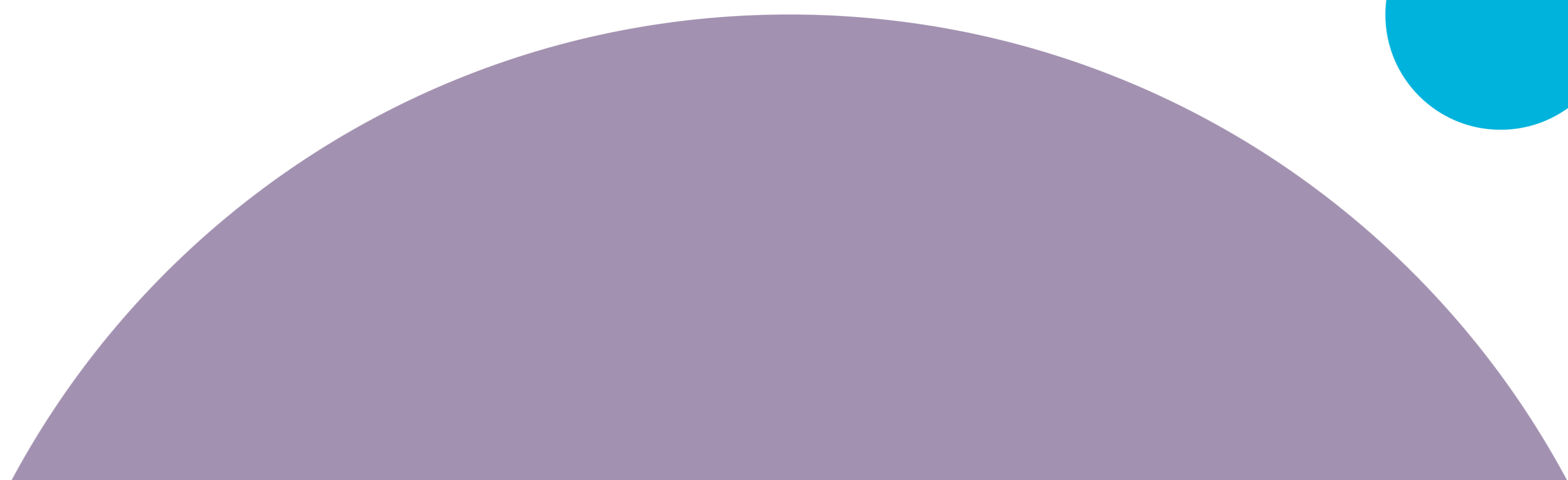
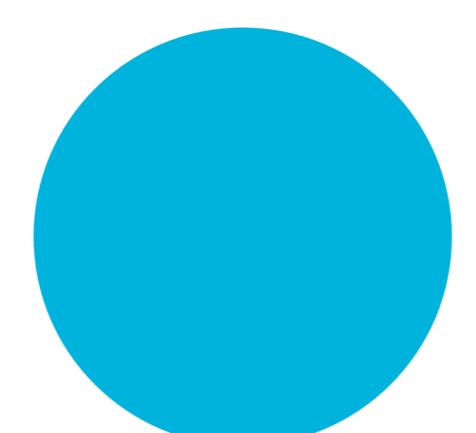
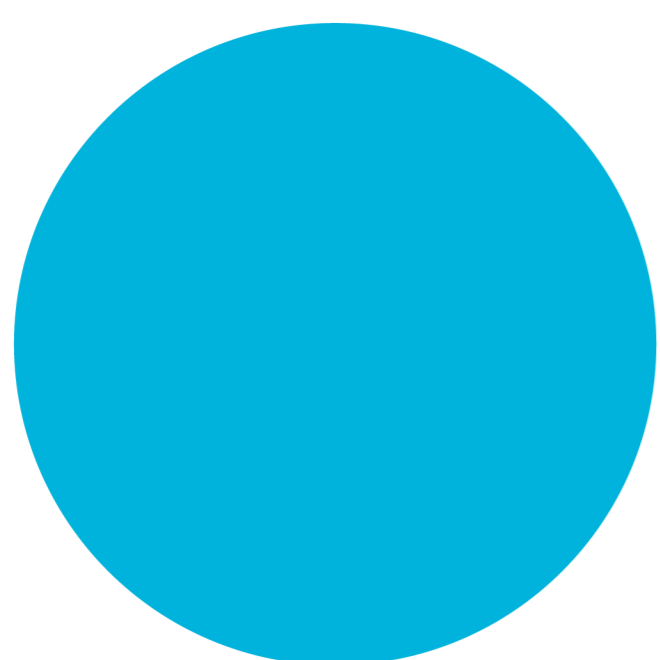
My non-clinical days are usually filled up with meetings or meeting admin, project work or responding to emails on a variety of matters like patient concerns or menu feedback. Some projects I've been working on over the past year include piloting a nutrition screening tool in our service, contributing to a toolkit for dietitians working with people with personality disorders, creating & running a group practical cooking sessions, & working with a psychologist on a teaching session on trauma-informed practice in weight management.

I'm also a committee member for BDA Forensic Dietitians Subgroup, which was launched in October '24. My role here so far has mainly revolved around the financial planning of the group leading up to our first in-person study in February, but other responsibilities include raising awareness of our niche role, promoting research & sharing learning from across different forensic services in the UK.

## What advice would you offer to someone considering a role in your specialism?

If you have a close relative or friend living with mental illness, forensics or mental health dietetics could be for you. It makes the work incredibly meaningful & interesting.

If you don't, I have a small bit of advice – give mental health dietetics & people with mental illness a chance. Stop & consider if you have any preconceptions about what it might be like to work with them. Put yourself in their shoes. These are quite often the people who have, through no fault of their own, been born into poor circumstances & deprivation or have been through incredible amounts of trauma in their lives. Nearly every student I've had come to spend some time in forensics has left with a much different (much improved!) idea of what it's like to work with those with mental illness. Mental health & forensics are crying out for dietitians & we can make a significant impact, not just in relation to the physical health inequalities they routinely experience, but in the inequalities they so often experience simply because they have a mental illness.



### The thing I'm most proud of

Considering my father has schizophrenia, just working with patients with schizophrenia & other mental illnesses has been really rewarding for me & I'm incredibly proud of that. Having this prior experience of the illness has helped me understand my patients a lot more, and working my patients has helped me understand my father a lot more.

Aside from that, knowing that on many levels (1:1, on a service level & at national level with the BDA Forensic Dietitians Subgroup) I'm working in & contributing to an emerging area of dietetics is something that gives me a satisfying sense of achievement.

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### How I want my future to look

I would like to keep working towards building a team here in our service. Mental health dietetics is becoming more popular & dietetic teams are growing, especially within forensics. There is still so much to learn, so much projects to get involved in & so much research waiting to be done to improve patient care. I am trying to build links with universities to promote the role of a forensic dietitian & to have student research projects based here. I would also like to start getting involved in research myself – I have some research interests that I would love to contribute to, for example in behaviour change techniques, the ketogenic diet / metabolic dysfunction in mental illness & interventions targeting antipsychotic induced weight gain.

### Anything else?

If you aren't already a member of our new Forensics sub-group, sign up to learn more about our role. All MHSG members can join our sub-groups for free.