

Podcast – Jo Merrifield interviewing Jim Macpherson

Transcript

Jo Merrifield speaking with Jim Macpherson

Time

*0:11: Welcome to this episode of Clinical Research Conversations brought to you by
(Jo) Edinburgh Clinical Research Facility. My name is Jo Merrifield, and today I've been chatting to Jim Macpherson, discussing his journey from acting to becoming a data manager in clinical trials. It's a good one. Enjoy.*

*0:37: Hi, well today I'm speaking with Jim Macpherson, who is a data manager who works
(Jo) at cancer clinical trials at the Western General Hospital here in Edinburgh. Maybe better known by some of our listeners as DCI Michael Jardine in the BBC Taggart series.*

0:53: STV Taggart series.

(Jim)

*0:54: Sorry, STV. So, I guess what I'm really interested in - these podcasts are all about
(Jo) people's careers in clinical research, and obviously you've had quite a varied career, and it would be really nice to hear how it all joins up and how your career has kind of mapped out and how you've got to where you are today.*

*1:13: Alright. Well, yeah, when I was 17, I applied to be what's called a medical laboratory
(Jim) scientific officer - it's an MLSO - in neuropathology at the Southern General in Glasgow, and I got that job and that's the equivalent of a biomedical scientist now - BMS - within the diagnostic labs. And I was there for five years, four to five years, and it was great. It is absolute gold standard of laboratories, and formative. It was my university. We did a thing called day release in those days, so I went to Stow College to do anatomy and biochemistry and physiology, I think it was. And then I went to the Glasgow College of Technology, which is now a university - they all are now - and I got my HNC there and I was a fully qualified lab tech.*

*2:14: And then I got slightly jaded and I started to see my life as a lab technician when I
was 65, which is bizarrely the age I am now. I could see my life ahead of me and I thought, oh, no, no, no, no, I don't want to do that. And I thought, well, what am I going to do then? What do I want to do? That's usually the people's... most people's problem is they know what they don't want to do, but the difficulty is knowing what you want to do.*

*2:43: So I did AmDram, but before that I had an abortive attempt to join the police in
Glasgow, which is quite ironic. I went to the interview and I realised very quickly that it was not for me. And that's when I came down Sauchiehall Street, I thought, what is it I want to do? And I was quite good at the amateur dramatics, and I thought that's what I want to do.*

*3:04: There was a girl in the lab said, well, there's a drama school called Royal Scottish
Academy of Music and Drama, which is now the Conservatoire. And I applied there and I got in. And it was great. That really was my university, three years doing a diploma there, acting diploma, and I had a ball, but at the end of three years you've got to get a job. And I was lucky enough to win the BBC Carleton Hobbs Award,*

which was a radio prize. Again, ironically, the microphone has been really, really good to me over the years.

3:40: And I went down to... I won this prize. I went down to London and I did six months on the Radio Drama Rep Company, which if you listen to Radio 4, Radio 3, all the plays that you hear will contain members of the Rep for the smaller parts, sometimes the bigger parts as well. So I did that and came back to Glasgow to marry my wife Jacqueline. And I stayed there and I worked in an engineering firm with pressing things out while I went for auditions and stuff like that.

4:12: Taggart came along and that was a 12 week job, and 15 years later I was still there. It was a roller coaster. Once you were on that roller coaster, both financially and enjoyment, you were on for the full run. And when that stopped for me, my kids were all, you know, starting late stage school, early university, so I had a kind of job when I was off. My wife still worked in the lab. That's where I met my wife, by the way.

4:45: So I decided, right, I'm not saying house husband, but I was more concerned with the kids at that time. But when they all went to university, I really hadn't... I found myself doing nothing. An actor's life is very, you know, it's full on or nothing, you know.

5:02: So I did other things. I continue, in fact, now it's really the only job that I do, in 1999 I got the Rebus gig for audiobooks when they were... I mean they shipped them out on tapes - abridged, you know. It's the hardest job I've ever done in my life was that, but I'm now just finished the 25th book which, and I'm not saying it gets any easier, but I now know how to cope with it and do my research on it. It's all about preparation, as is most research jobs, funnily enough.

5:37: So to go back to the research. In 2013, my wife said, oh look, there's a little job in the lab in Edinburgh, University this was. Cutting sections, which is what we did in neuropathology. And I thought hmm, and it's a bit slightly embarrassing, not embarrassing, but I didn't know how folk would cope with somebody who'd been on the telly, but it'd been 13 years before then.

6:00: And I went into the labs. So I got the job, and it was a low grade - 3 in university - in 2013, and it was a complete revelation to me. I had forgotten that in life, mental health wise, you need punctuation and a 9 to 5 job in research gave me that. Friday nights became Friday nights. Talking to people every day. An actor's life can be quite isolating. You only meet them when you're doing the work. When you're not, you don't meet anybody, you know. It can be pretty heavy.

6:44: So, as I say, I thought, this is fantastic. It was only, again it was a bit like Taggart, it was only a six month job, and here I am 12 years later, you know. It seems to be a kind of pattern in my life.

6:58: So all I was doing in those days was cutting sections and collecting blocks for Edinburgh research projects - Edinburgh University research projects. So I was in... that was my toe in the water. And I thought, oh, there's a big world out here, because I'd only been used to diagnostics within the lab. I realised that there were so many PhD students who needed sections, who were doing different types of

projects. So I got a lot of knowledge of lots of research projects that were going on within Edinburgh University.

7:29: And then, so that six month job, I knew that was coming to an end, so I was kind of on the lookout within that world. And a job came up in what's called - what was called - the ECMC. Don't ask me what it means 'cos it's always difficult. ECMC was a kind of laboratory set up to help with cancer trials, like sending off blocks, doing sampling, blood sampling, PBMCs, buffy coats. All these kind of things which I did, and I got that job and did that for another year and a half.

8:05: But part of that job was to go down to a meeting, a regular meeting, which discussed with all, everybody, who was involved in each cancer trial to go down to their weekly meeting. And I went down to that and I went, oh, there's another branch down here. It really is, it's incredible, research. It just opens up. It's like a bifurcating, you know, graph. It just goes on forever.

8:30: So I thought, oh, I quite like this as well. So I got to know those people who were the research data managers. Now that is a name which is probably wrong. Data manager... it sounds as though you just put data into the computer. You're a trial coordinator. You are the hub within the wheel, you know, the spokes go through you, all the different departments right through you. You're the main person to go to within a trial. So I saw this and I thought, I want that. So a job came up and Moira Stewart was the principal lead in Team 1, which covers a lot of tumour groups.

9:12: And I said, would it be alright if I went for this? And as usual, she said, yeah, yeah, you know, nothing ventured, nothing gained. Turned out I didn't get it. Another girl called Elizabeth Brown, who I worked with for a good while, she got the job, and I thought, oh right, OK. And I went down to Moira and Moira went, oh, I'm so sorry you were close and blah blah blah.

9:31: But as with all these things, what happened was someone else left within six weeks. And they said, would you like, you know, because they don't have to go through the whole process again, would you like to take it?

9:40: *Yes, you're still on the books.*
(Jo)

9:43: And I said yes. So that was 2015. And yeah, it was a baptism of fire, that was, it took one really heavy trial for me to really know what I was doing. It takes a year at least to learn the ropes. Everything's bespoke. Each trial is totally different. So yeah, but once I got it under my belt, I started to really enjoy the job.
(Jim)

10:07: *OK, and do you mind, what kind of grade you went in there?*
(Jo)

10:10: Oh yes, so I went from 3 into, when I went to the ECMC I got an upgrade to 4, and when I was in 4, I was doing a lot of things and I went, hey, wait a minute, I'm doing a lot of things that a 5 should get, so within the ECMC job I got an upgrade, which is again a good thing about research. They do value you and will pay you correctly - within the university that is.
(Jim)

10:35: When I got my first job in research, it was a 6. That was when I started in 2016. And then Moi was leaving to retire and said, would you like to run the department?

- 10:48: *Brilliant.*
(Jo)
- 10:49: And I said, absolutely, it's what I want. And so I got a 7 for that. So yeah, there is
(Jim) career progression within, I can absolutely vouch for that, within the university departments, within research.
- 11:06: And so my job now is to run Team 1, which has maybe six tumour groups. It's the
largest team in the Scottish Cancer Research Network and there's six people who I
am their line manager, and myself. And yeah, we run quite a good tight ship, and I'm
very, very proud of it. So that's a brief history of my life.
- 11:35: *That's great. Thank you so much. Really, really interesting to hear. And I think it's... I*
(Jo) *find when people have come from a varied background, they've got a lot of life*
experience that they can bring to the world.
- 11:45: Transferable skills!
(Jim)
- 11:46: *Transferable skills – that buzz-word!*
(Jo)
- 11:48: It's so true. I'll tell you what. When I first started back, and you had to do things like,
(Jim) you know, run meetings and stuff like that. Even the lowly ones were required to do
the minutes for the meeting. And I realised I was kind of doing my game face on, you
know, and I thought this is acting. Everybody does it. Everybody does... everybody
plays a character when they come to work, because it's definitely not the character
that you play with your wife or partner when you go home.
- 12:19: *Yes, very true.*
(Jo)
- 12:20: So you come in and you go, right, here's the Jim MacPherson that works here. And I
(Jim) did, and that's when... That's two things. When you're in trouble and you've got to
maybe give somebody a row, a good Glasgow accent really, really matters. And the
confidence you have that comes from standing... for me it's doing A Play, a Pie and a
Pint, for instance, I don't know if you've heard of it? A Play, a Pie and a Pint was
devised for the Òran Mór pub in Glasgow, and it was two weeks' rehearsal,
essentially, but really it was only about eight days' rehearsal. Which was, you did the
rehearsal the week before for an hour play, and another actor - I might slightly
swear here, but I think you'll be all right with it - on the Monday before you went on
- you only did five nights, five sort of afternoon shows – he called it ****-a-brick
Monday. The terror was just, I mean, palpable. Everybody was scared.
- 13:24: The only other time I've ever had that was with... I did Art at the Lyceum in
Edinburgh with Forbes Masson and Andy Gray - sadly dead now - and all of us were
just so, so scared before we went on.
- 13:39: So standing in a room now, or sitting in a room talking to people is really not a
problem. However, it still does give me that whoa, that little nervous bit in the back
of your neck, you think, right, OK. So yeah, all my acting and whatever, I've used
within research as well.
- 13:58: *That's really interesting. So, tell me more about your day-to-day. What does a data*
(Jo) *manager/team leader get up to on a day-to-day basis?*

- 14:07: So you come in, and you've got a plan of work. And nine times out of ten, that goes out the window because of one little email that's causing a major problem. I am a problem solver, and I didn't realise that until I was in this job. I thought I'm quite good at this. I will go and get it sorted without saying to people. Sometimes, well, I will know when to say to people, I got that this is, you know, this is really bad, we need to talk about this. But in the main, I go in, I go ... oh dear, oh dear, right, OK, and I'll go and sort it out quickly before it gets any bigger.
(Jim)
- 14:43: But the day-to-day is I set up clinical trials within the cancer brief that we've got. That involves asking all the different local departments like radiology, pathology, labs, all these different departments, if they're involved, for permission to go ahead with the trial. Usually it's not a problem. But there are queries that come back – pharmacy, those kind of things.
- 15:09: In commercial trials... there's two types - commercial trials and non-commercial trials. Non-commercial trials tend to be run by universities. Commercial trials are Big Pharma, but that's what pays our wages, you know, they do pay rather well. However, they are rather demanding, and even within the 10 years or 12 years that I've been doing this, jeez, I mean they really, really want their pound of flesh, you know.
- 15:35: So, yeah, but as I say, something can turn up within another person's trials, and I'll help them out as well and the kind of the supreme backup for all trials, if they're off, and someone else is off, I'm the one that sorts it out for everything down there.
- 15:51: *That must be... I'm guessing you've got numerous trials all happening?*
(Jo)
- 15:55: Yeah, I mean I've got my own trials. I'm trying to cut down on my own trials, but I did have my own trials which I carried on as well. So you've got them. But that's good, I think, because it keeps you at the coalface, yeah. So you're at the... a lot of management are distanced from the coalface.
(Jim)
- 16:13: Now my mate who's an engineering CEO in America - really big guy - he said all about... what he says is he always goes into a new company, comes in and goes, "where does the steel come in?" "There, that door there." "Right. What do you do to the steel?" "We fix it here, we do this ..." "And where does it go out?" "That door there." He says that'll solve most problems because you'll see what's happening and what's wrong if it doesn't work, because that is essentially it, and that's essentially my job as well. Going "where does the tissue come in?" "Oh yes, and where does it go out?" Yeah, that door there. And we process it in the middle, or I get Pam who's CRUK Tissue Group now to do it for me.
- 16:57: *Great. It sounds like it's quite a contrast from what you were saying about being an actor can be quite lonely, and now you're in this environment where you're constantly communicating...*
(Jo)
- 17:05: Yeah, constantly going "don't bug me – please don't give me problems." Yeah, yeah, that's exactly it.
(Jim)
- 17:12: It is... coming to work is the biggest, the best thing for mental health for anybody, I think. Go to a job. Maybe not 9 to 5 or whatever, but 9 to 5 really, really helps. And as I say, the University of Edinburgh has been extremely good to me.

- 17:32: *Brilliant. And I guess finally, it's been a brilliant conversation, if someone came to you and said, oh, I'm thinking of a career change, what top tips might you give someone who's thinking about getting a job in clinical research or maybe at the beginning of their career?*
(Jo)
- 17:47: I think I've discussed this. There's no job too low. Go and be a porter, just get in. That's the key, is get into a facility like Edinburgh University. The NHS as well, I mean, you get in there, there's that chap that did the book about the brain. And he started as a porter, I can't remember the chap's name, he's a surgeon now. Because you go in as a porter and you go, oh, this is what I want. Therefore, what you do is you go, I really, really want to be a whatever, so I'll go away and study for it. But go in first and see what it's like. That'd be a tip. Apply for everything. It's people you know, networking is still so important. You know, who you know in this job. Not when you're in it, but before you're in it, is if you've got any contact with them, go and see round a lab or go and see round a research... Ask, "can I?", cos that's, that is huge.
(Jim)
- 18:47: I mean, when I went for my first interview, it was a letter I wrote, and then I got a call. Now, if you go for a job, you must phone them up, before you even get a knock back and say I want to see your department, I want to see it. Now I do interviews, that's a sure fire, you're getting an interview. I say, they're keen, so I'm going to be keen as well to see them. I'm going to maybe ignore the fact that they don't have just the right qualification. Nobody's got just the right qualification as well.
- 19:23: And again, I will go back to the acting. I remember going for a job, and the chap said to me, "Can you ride a horse, James?" I said, "I can do rising trot", you know, whatever that was. And he went, "no, we're really looking for a guy that can ride a horse". I went, "all right". So I never got it, and a guy, an actor called Jimmy Chisholm's – he's reasonably famous, he's in River City now - but he got it. So about six months later I bumped into Jimmy. I said, "Hey, how was that job with riding a horse?" He went "I never got on a horse once".
- 19:57: So from that time onwards, I just used to lie and say, yes, I can do. "Can you build a nuclear reactor, Jim?" "Yep, I did one last week." So I'm not suggesting you go in and lie in your interviews, but there'll be things you can learn. You can always say, "not sure, but I can learn that" and you can, and you can reasonably quickly.
- 20:17: *That's brilliant. Well, thank you so much for taking the time this morning.*
(Jo)
- 20:19: Pleasure.
(Jim)
- 20:20: *It's been fascinating, and I'm sure, hopefully listeners will enjoy that too. So, thank you very much. It's been a pleasure.*
(Jo)
- 20:27: Thank you.
(Jim)
- 20:34: *I could have spoken to Jim all day about his fascinating career and his anecdotes. Hopefully you've enjoyed listening and realise it's never too late to change direction in your career. Until next time.*
(Jo)