

FACE TO FACE



Ursula Arens

Ursula has a degree in dietetics and currently works as a freelance writer in Nutrition and Dietetics. She enjoys the gifts of Asperger's.

Our F2F interviews feature people who influence nutrition policies and practices in the UK.

Ursula meets:**URSULA PHILPOT**

Specialist for Eating Disorders

Lecturer at Leeds Beckett University

TV presenter: *Supersize vs Superskinny*



We share the lovely name. We share the wonderful profession. But we are not career twins. Ursula's mission is support for eating disorders: a subject that I find scary and alarming. Ursula claims dyslexia: tap-tap-tapping detailed texts would not be her choice of career.

Ursula did a joint honours degree in Human Physiology and Environmental Science, but translation into a fun job seemed remote. A career catalogue kept falling open at D-for-Dietetics, so she signed up for the postgraduate course at Leeds Metropolitan University. Was she a foodie person? "I do remember as a pupil writing a letter complaining that there was never enough salad or vegetables for late shift at the school canteen," she laughed. Ursula really enjoyed the Dietetics course but was a year late for full grants: finance with bank loans and evening waitressing added stress to the experience of student life.

Her first dietetic post was a rotational one at Leeds General Infirmary. She particularly enjoyed the diabetes clinic, which balanced the technical challenges of pump systems and insulin prescriptions with real foods guidance. She also completed her Masters dissertation on macronutrient balance during refeeding of anorexia nervosa patients. "The practice had been to limit proteins to spare renal function, so feeds were high in carbohydrates in the form of glucose polymers. I was able to demonstrate that normal macronutrient ratios were well tolerated and improved outcomes."

Eating disorders is the drumbeat of Ursula's professional interests. She did occasional work at a private centre for mental health in York (The Retreat), but in 2006, she was delighted to join the Yorkshire Centre for Eating Disorders as a full-time dietitian. Ursula describes the challenges: no training or supervision, and no reference points supporting dietetic practice in this specialist area. But challenges were more than balanced, with the benefits of having much more time with each patient and having friendly contact with expert mental health colleagues to share detailed support plans for patients. "That is why I love my job. Patients with eating disorders so often say that dietitians made the most difference to their recovery," said Ursula.

Her dream career had the double tracks of clinical work with eating disorders and teaching. The offer of occasional lecturing at Leeds Beckett University allowed her a gentle immersion into academic life. She has now been a part-time lecturer for many years, and really enjoys sharing insights with future dietitians. "I am so lucky that my career has given me the exact balance of interests I had hoped for," said Ursula. Was it luck? Or was it targeted initiative in a consistent direction? Perhaps yes and yes.

Should the British Dietetic Association do more to define best practices for solo dietitians working in eating disorder units? Ursula thought so. She joined the mental health interest group, and then suggested the development

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of professional guidance. “Colleagues said it was a great idea.” Ursula forgot to explain how very stretched she was in her very busy job. But suddenly she was Chairman of the group and producer of the first guidelines on dietetic practice for eating disorders. She was also part of a small council of dietitians who set up the Northern Eating Disorders Interest (NEDI) group. In the past decade there has been a huge increase in dietetic skills towards addressing behavioural aspects of difficult eating patterns. Motivational interviewing and greater awareness of psychology make a really big difference to better supporting patients.

Ursula has been a member of many expert policy groups on eating disorders: The NICE Guidelines Development Group; The Clinical Reference Group for NHS England; The National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health organised by the Royal College of Psychiatrists. “It is a bit scary, but a great privilege, to be at the table with academic experts. And you learn so much from the debates behind decisions,” said Ursula. She strongly recommends applying for such posts, although they are always lots of work for no pay.

Ursula has enjoyed a few side-steps during her career. Her various television projects include as adviser and presenter of the popular Channel 4 series *Supersize vs Superskinny* in 2010. The format presented the food decisions of very overweight and underweight subjects, with Ursula giving sage advice to both groups, and providing general guidance on healthier diet

choices. Television projects are fast-paced and stressful, but offer unique opportunities to reach millions and balance some of the sensationalist themes that story-seeking media tend to promote. Ursula feels “it is really important that more dietitians do more media comment.”

We discuss the delicate topic of language to describe body weight. There are occasional complaints about health practitioners using words that may upset underweight patients, with variations such as skinny, lanky, emaciated and skeletal. BMI categories are the official terminology, and while the range description of 18-25 as ideal communicates condemnatory ‘not ideal’ to those outside these limits, Ursula states that words matter. While extremes of weight need to be addressed because they affect health, there is also much to learn from greater acceptance of the wide diversity of body shapes. This also includes the many ways of eating for weight loss or gain. “If it works, it works, should be how we judge diets,” said Ursula.

Ursula currently balances family life with three main activities: Senior Lecturer at Leeds Beckett University, Director of the eating disorders treatment centre Insight Eating, and Consultant Dietitian for complex health conditions. However, Ursula likes her plate-of-activity to be brimming full, and she is currently also researching for her PhD project on diet therapy to support patients with chronic pain.

We both love our profession in very different ways. But we agree: perhaps the profession needs another Ursula.