

John Lawlor has recently celebrated his fifth anniversary as Chief Executive at NTW. But how much do we all know about the person behind the job title? So, let's find out!



Who is in your family?

I'm married to Julie, who also works in the NHS, and I have two grown up children (32 and 28 - how did that happen!). I have two pet labradors, Murphy who's 11 and Finn who's only 14 weeks. Poor Murphy's not sure what's hit him.

What are your likes and dislikes?

I don't like it when things don't go to plan or when I feel I'm not on top of things (and when this happens I can get quite ratty!). Less seriously, temperatures above 25 degrees, driving rain. Oh and when it gets too cold! Basically, I'm a bit of a wimp! Favourite music is from the 1970's and 1980's such as Pink Floyd, David Bowie and Genesis, from the 1990's Peter Gabriel, Oasis, Pulp, and most recently Hozier, Elbow, Ed Sheeran and George Ezra.

Where did you grow up and study?

I was born in Croydon to Irish parents who met while working in a mental health hospital. My mum was a cleaner and my dad a porter. We moved up north when I was three and lived in a town in West Yorkshire called Keighley. I went to a Roman Catholic comprehensive school where I was a bit of a swot! I went on to Manchester University to study maths and then moved to South Yorkshire to gain a teaching qualification.

How did your career develop?

I began my career as a maths teacher and taught in two secondary schools in Doncaster. With a heavy heart I left teaching after four years, not because of the kids but because of the state of morale of the other teachers in the staff room.

I became a government statistician in 1988, initially in the Department of Employment, collecting and reporting on the monthly unemployment statistics. I then moved to the Department of Health in 1992, working on GP services. In 1995 I moved into the NHS for the first time, working in the Trent Region on primary care and performance management. I re-joined the Department in 1997, working for Frank Dobson and Alan Milburn (and Simon Stevens who was at that time their political advisor), covering all aspects of NHS performance.

I returned to the NHS in 1999 to become a director in an NHS trust in West Yorkshire, where I stayed until 2005, moving on to be Chief Executive at Harrogate trust in 2006. I was seconded to the Department for 9 months to work as Ian Dalton's deputy, co-ordinating the NHS's response to the Swine Flu (H1N1) pandemic.

I then moved to a role as a Primary Care Trust (PCT) CE in Leeds and then Airedale, Bradford and Leeds in 2010. As career moves go this wasn't the greatest. Six months after taking up the job Andrew Lansley, then Health Secretary, announced the abolition of PCTs! So my job ended up mainly being to prepare to dissolve the PCT, support the establishment of CCGs and to ensure our staff were helped to find jobs in the new structures. Not the most rewarding role but I'm pleased that the great staff in the PCT were generally able to find new roles in the post-2013 NHS structures and that I helped six CCGs to be established.

Following my abolition (as CE of a PCT you will understand), I moved to the North East and joined NHS England as the Director covering Cumbria, Northumberland, Tyne and Wear. I really enjoyed working with the staff in the team, with local CCGs and the local NHS providers, but if I'm honest I became frustrated working in the organisation. My wife, Julie, and I decided that I should look to return doing what I'd enjoyed best - working in an NHS provider, either in the North East or nearer to 'home' in Yorkshire. Fortunately, the job of CE at NTW became available so I applied with great hope I would be what was wanted. I was honoured and delighted to be offered the job and I started on 23rd June 2014, so I've just passed my five year anniversary.

I have often said and that's because it is true, being CE of NTW is a huge privilege and it's an honour to be part of 'Team NTW'. I truly believe we have something special here and that together we can move onwards and upwards to be the very best mental health and disabilities trust in everything we do.

What attracted you to the role of CE at NTW and what did you want to achieve?

Lots of things. A wish to get closer to patients again after being in other NHS roles for the previous four years. A strong desire to work in the mental health and disabilities sector of the NHS as it was the only part (except ambulance services) that I'd not done. An idea that just maybe my own lived experience could help me to understand the issues faced by at least some of the people we are here to serve. Because of what I'd heard about the Trust, its staff and its services. And, I've got to be honest, in a small part because it wasn't NHS England!!

What have you learned most in the last five years?

How important lived values are in making an organisation special and focused on service users, carers, families and staff. That the sector is complicated, technical, intellectually stimulating and operates within a legal and ethical framework that I've not experienced in my other roles in the NHS. I've also learnt that I wish I'd moved into this part of the NHS sooner and that NTW is the best organisation I've ever worked for and my job of CE here in leading 6,000 wonderful staff is the best I've ever done.

And, finally, that I can be a bit of a hypocrite. For example, I can be a bit of a control freak even though I've sought over the past five years to develop the culture in the Trust to be more devolved, empowering, developing leadership at all levels so that decisions can be taken as close to where the service is delivered whenever possible.

What are you most proud of?

Personally, my ability to hold down senior roles in the NHS while living with recurring depression. More importantly though, is my relationship with my boys (men now) and my wife, Julie, who is a star and a saint for putting up with me.

What has been your biggest challenge?

Getting the right balance between work and life out of work. Generally I've not succeeded in this and it has sometimes been at the expense of loved ones around me, either because I eat into home time doing work or because I'm not always 'in the room' when I'm needed to be.

What do you love about your job?

Just about everything – most of the time. A great organisation to be part of; 6,000 wonderful staff; the best Executive Team I've worked with in my career; a highly talented, unified Board; a supportive and challenging Council of Governors; good relationships with partners; but above all a feeling that we are making a difference to the lives of the people who need our help.

What do you hate about your job?

Too many meetings. Far too many emails. The confusing system nationally.

Is there any particular moment or memory that stands out for you?

In work, our first CQC outstanding rating and its recognition of our fab staff. In my personal life, going to Buckingham Palace - as an Irish heritage, working class, non-Royalist - and actually enjoying it (gulp). But much more importantly, having found the 'perfect' person in Julie, my wife (yuk)!

What do you think other people should know about NTW?

What a wide range of services we provide and the help that's available. The breadth of skills, experience and professionalism of our workforce. What a really good job we do the large majority of the time and that we are happy to learn and improve when things go wrong so we can fix them.

Has the job changed you?

Yes in that I feel I've found my niche and I wished I'd discovered NTW earlier in my career. I believe the job has made me more aware of the challenges people face in the North East; I'd like to think I'm now more open-minded, less judgemental and more empathic. And I've definitely become more "comfortable in my own skin" and less self-critical.

What or who inspires you?

Lots of people but I'll pick out just one. I talk on our Leadership Programme about Annie, a healthcare assistant at Harrogate Hospital when I was CE there. She was in a Band 3 post but was most definitely a leader on the ward. Nobody made any big decisions without checking them out with Annie first. And she told me off (actually tapped my hand) when I was doing a shift on the ward and hadn't cleaned a commode to her exacting standards! That's leadership in every seat.

What surprises you?

The public's voting patterns across the world in electing their leaders (I'm sure you can work out who I might be thinking about). More positively, when positive, passionate, values driven people come together, it blows me away to see what a real difference they can make to the lives of others.

Do you have a message for the staff at NTW?

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. It really is a pleasure and honour to call myself Chief Executive of this organisation we all work for and the positive impact you have on others' lives day in and day out, despite the considerable pressures you face.

What next?

For the Trust: bringing the best of NTW together with the best of Cumbria, while working to improve things quickly where necessary. I've already met with some of our future staff and I'm confident with support and direction they will see the benefits of being part of an enlarged specialist mental health and disabilities provider so we can go from good to better to best.

For me personally: I'm not going anywhere any time soon (is that a mixture of cheers and boos I can hear?) I expect this to be my last full-time job in the NHS and I couldn't think of a better organisation to sign off from. But I most definitely have huge ambition for the Trust over the coming years before I sail off into the distance...

And finally, a bit about my mental and physical health

I wasn't sure when writing this whether to say much about my own health and, if so, where to put it. And also whether it might come across self-indulgent. Anyway, I've decided to say it so sorry if you feel I've made the wrong call.

In the spirit of parity of esteem and looking at the whole person, I thought I'd tell you about my two chronic conditions (besides being someone who talks too much, is too happy sitting in front of the TV and can be rather moody (I think I'll stop there!). I have had Type 1 Diabetes since 1993. It came on out of the blue and I remember being a bit bewildered by the fact one day everything seemed normal, the next I went to see my GP who said he thought I had type 1 diabetes and three days later I saw a specialist who told me I had to start injecting three times a day.

Now the second condition. Some of you will know that I have lived for nearly two decades with recurring depression (probably longer as this is when I was actually diagnosed).

Thanks to the skill, expertise, patience and optimism of two wonderful professionals in NTW I have now been well for two years. So I'd like to make a public statement of my thanks to both of them (you know who you are) for helping me to accept myself as me, to make sense of the past and to identify the triggers to prevent me from falling into another trough of despair.

My learning from all of this? It really is important to seek the right support. It is possible to come to terms with mental illness. Not always to cure it (my depression will always be 'there' for me to some extent). But it is worth finding support to help you to manage it so that you can live the life you want to be. But most of all, to not let the Black Dog win, but to humanely muzzle it. Most of all believe in yourself.