



## Researcher In Focus Series – September 2021

This month's Researcher in Focus is Dr Siobhán Fox, a Lecturer and Senior Postdoctoral Researcher at the Centre for Gerontology and Rehabilitation, UCC.



### What is your area of research?

My research interests are in improving the care of people living with neurodegenerative illnesses such as dementia and Parkinson's disease.

One of my long-term interests is understanding and improving palliative care for people with neurodegenerative illnesses. Palliative care is often misunderstood, but it can be a fantastic approach to improve the quality-of-life of people living with incurable diseases such as dementia and Parkinson's disease. I am currently working on a HRB funded project to develop a novel service-delivery model for community-based dementia palliative care for implementation by the HSE. When I began working in this area there was very little published literature, and it has been exciting to see this topic gain increased attention in recent years.

I am also very interested in improving the care of people with young onset dementia, these are people who are diagnosed with dementia before the age of 65 years. While previously conducting qualitative research with people with dementia, I saw first-hand that those with young onset dementia had unique needs and their lives and those of their families were impacted greatly by the onset of the disease. My research looks at the unique needs of this group, and how Irish healthcare services might be improved to better respond to these needs. I co-authored a report on this topic which was launched by the National Dementia Office during Alzheimer's awareness week 2020.



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### **What sparked your interest in this area?**

Since secondary school I can remember being fascinated by how the brain worked, and I chose to complete an undergraduate degree in Applied Psychology. During my degree I was particularly drawn to the areas of memory and cognition, and on psychological processes of ageing. From a personal point of view, I was very close with my grandmother who lived with us during her final years when she developed Alzheimer's disease, which gave me a personal interest in dementia. I went on to complete a PhD in Applied Psychology, and in 2013 I began working in the Centre for Gerontology and Rehabilitation where, through working with a team of colleagues at the forefront of dementia and Parkinson's research, my passion for this area grew even more.

### **What stage are you at in your career and are there any achievements you are particularly proud of?**

I have been researching in the area of neurodegeneration since completing my PhD 8 years ago. I have also been teaching more on this area in recent years, as a Lecturer on the MSc in Dementia programme in UCC which had its first student intake in 2018.

One achievement that stands out for me was coordinating the development and launch in 2016 of the first national Irish Guidelines for Palliative Care for People with Parkinson's disease. This work garnered international interest and led to me becoming a member of the international working group on palliative care for Parkinson's disease, led by Dr Benzi Kluger at the University of Colorado, a collaboration which has resulted in a number of exciting projects and publications.

### **What impact would you like your research to have?**

I really hope that my research can contribute to a body of work which will impact the lives of people living with dementia and Parkinson's disease and other neurodegenerative illnesses, by improving health and social care services through the publication and implementation of national reports, guidelines, policy documents, media outputs, and research papers. I also value the contribution of people living with dementia and Parkinson's as partners in my research projects, which I hope increases the relevance and value of my work.

### **Who has helped or inspired you in your area of research?**

I have had the privilege of working with many committed and enthusiastic researchers during my PhD and postdoctoral career to date. I have fantastic colleagues in the Centre for Gerontology and Rehabilitation, and Professor Suzanne Timmons in particular has been an inspiring mentor as someone who has a passion for undertaking impactful research which truly improves the care of older people, particularly those with dementia.



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**Contact Details:**

**Email:** [s.fox@ucc.ie](mailto:s.fox@ucc.ie)

**Research Gate:** <https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Siobhan-Fox>

**Twitter:** [@drsiobhanfox](https://twitter.com/drsiobhanfox)