



EXPANDING THE ROLE OF BIOMEDICAL SCIENTISTS

IBMS members share their experiences of completing the **Advanced Specialist Diploma (ASD) in Histopathology Reporting** – and their supervisors talk about its wider benefits.

NHS services are under increasing strain. To help with this, the *NHS Long Term Workforce Plan*, published in June 2023, set out the need to increase the number of advanced and consultant level roles across healthcare. This would reduce the pressure on, and workload of, medical professionals.

Later that year, the IBMS published its *Long Term Biomedical Scientist Workforce Plan*, which shows how the profession is already helping to meet the challenges the NHS faces. IBMS training programmes and professional qualifications support biomedical scientists to take on advanced and consultant roles in pathology reporting teams. This includes the Advanced Specialist Diploma (ASD) in Histopathology Reporting.

Completing an ASD in Histopathology Reporting is a lot of work for candidates. It also requires hospital departments to invest in their training. But there are a lot of benefits for both.

Here, four IBMS members explain what the qualification involves, how it's helping them to progress in their careers and the difference it's making to their colleagues, hospitals and patients.

James' story

James Woodland is a Stage D Consultant Healthcare Scientist for Berkshire and Surrey Pathology Services and is based at Royal Surrey County Hospital.

"Before I passed the ASD in Gastrointestinal (GI) Histopathology Reporting, I was a Lead Biomedical Scientist for 13 years, managing over 70 people across four geographical locations.

I did the qualification because I wanted to have more of a direct contribution to patient care.

"I chose to do the GI ASD because my research and interest throughout my career has related to this type of pathology. Also, out of the three ASDs in histopathology reporting, GI is the largest workload within our department. Now I have the qualification, it will help to reduce the burden of our increasing amount of work on the wider pathologist team.

"Learning more about the pathophysiology of the various conditions that result in a biopsy or resection of the GI tract was fascinating. You learn how to frame your histopathology report to tie in with clinical presentations, looking at endoscopy images or scans, for example, to ensure the information you provide is relevant.

"I am grateful to have worked with 17 pathologists over four years who trained and supervised me reporting cases in the same way they do for junior doctors. They recognised that biomedical scientists have a level of training that can be tapped into to contribute to getting safe, timely and accurate results to patients.

"My educational supervisor, a pathologist, helped with everything from preparing and scrutinising my portfolios to supporting me to pass the intense 1.5-day exam that's part of the qualification.

"Now I'm moving from supervised to independent practice which is exciting. Once I complete stage D, if any GI pathology specimen comes into the department, I can dissect, analyse microscopically and issue diagnostic reports independently. I will be able to act in the same capacity as a pathologist at multidisciplinary team meetings to decide on the next steps of patient care.

"The qualification has taken my career in a different direction and I would recommend it if people have the support to do it. We have a lot of GI specimens to examine but a shortage of pathologists. More biomedical scientists doing this qualification means patients can get a diagnosis and be treated sooner."

Julie's story

Julie Watson is an Advanced Laboratory Practitioner in the histopathology department at the University Hospitals of North Midlands (UHNM) NHS Trust in Stoke-on-Trent.

"In 2019 I accepted a dissection and reporting role at UHNM. This involved participating in, and completing, the ASD in Gastrointestinal Histopathology Reporting.

"I had been dissecting at an advanced level for many years. However, the qualification has allowed me to really develop my knowledge and understanding. My dissection practice has improved as a consequence and I am now able to provide higher quality training to less experienced members of staff.



"Although independent reporting is initially quite daunting, the qualification allows you to gradually build on your skills and knowledge. Over time, you become more confident. Now I'm in stage D of the reporting qualification, I am able to independently report most simple specimen types, including benign biopsies and polyps. Second opinions are only required for the more complex cases.

"This has helped to reduce the quantity of non-urgent cases that are sent away for external reporting, and the associated cost. This has reduced the backlog and eased the pressure on consultant pathologists, who are now better able to focus on the more complex specimens.

"The qualification is challenging at times. There has been more than one occasion when I have thought 'I can't do this'.

But my advice to new participants is to embrace these challenges and enjoy this exciting and rewarding opportunity.

"The qualification has enhanced my career and also given me the ability to support my busy histopathology department."

"The qualification has taken my career in a different direction and I would recommend it if people have the support"

Sandie's story

Sandie Iles is an Advanced Specialist Biomedical Scientist at North West London Pathology.

"The proudest moment of my career is passing the ASD. When I started researching the ASD, I thought it was going to be impossible. But with the IBMS' guidance and support, I felt it was achievable, so took on the challenge. Through the different stages of the ASD, I built my competence as a member of the gynaecology reporting team.

"Completing the ASD is a huge undertaking. You need support as you will spend a lot of your own time building your breadth of knowledge. You will gain confidence by presenting audits to the multidisciplinary team and to wider clinical colleagues.

"As a consultant biomedical scientist is a relatively new role, you may also be challenged by healthcare colleagues, which helps to build your resilience. It's hard work and worth it in the end.

"Pathologists have always diagnosed within cellular pathology, with the

support of biomedical scientists. The addition of the consultant role brings a different perspective to the diagnostic and lab teams.

"I am in the post-qualification stage of the ASD where you build your experience and confidence. Now I can independently sign out cases. With the support of my colleagues and employer, I'm in a position to reach my career goal to be a consultant biomedical scientist."

Mary's story

Mary McElroy is Senior Dissector and Trainee Consultant Healthcare Scientist in GI Pathology at the Western Health and Social Care Trust in Londonderry, Northern Ireland.

"In Northern Ireland, cancer dissection was traditionally carried out by medical professionals. The ASD in Histopathology Reporting enables biomedical scientists to train and develop their skills in tissue dissection through various programmes and qualifications.

"I have completed the Diploma of Expert Practice in Histological Dissection and the ASD in Lower GI Dissection. These qualifications have given me the skills and knowledge to manage a fully scientist-led cut up in my histopathology department.

"I also mentor biomedical scientists to help them advance in cancer dissection. The guidance notes provided by the IBMS and the updates and communication from the Head of Examinations helped me to navigate the different stages of the four-and-a-half-year programme.

"I am now in stage D, which allows me to do independent reporting and continue to present the pathology at the upper and lower GI multidisciplinary team meetings.

"The IBMS histopathology qualifications help people to progress in their careers. The qualifications also benefit hospital departments as having consultant biomedical scientists on a pathology team can improve communication between laboratory staff and consultants."



The role of biomedical scientists

Historically, histopathology reporting was solely carried out by medically qualified professionals. So, there is a lot of work to raise awareness in hospitals of the vital role that biomedical scientists can play competently and safely.

Dr Dan Brett is a Consultant Histopathologist and supervised Julie Watson during her ASD. He says that it's important to define the biomedical scientist consultant role and its scope and keep colleagues informed. "I had to reach out to stakeholders and partners to involve them in our discussions ahead of Julie starting this work," explains Dan. "We then had to keep the management team in our department and the GI pathology team involved in, and aware of, what we are doing."

Reducing NHS pressures

When biomedical scientists take on consultant roles, it can help to ease pressure in hospitals. Dan says the qualification is helping to reduce the workload of medical colleagues.

"Julie is a very valued member of the GI pathology team, and she makes a wide contribution to our service. Dissecting and evaluating specimens helps to reduce backlogs in the labs, as well as the number of specimens we outsource to other labs. It makes our service more sustainable."

Sandie's education supervisor, Dr Patrizia Viola, Consultant Histo/Cytopathologist, says that bringing biomedical scientists into multidisciplinary teams can benefit the NHS in this "historical moment" in time. "With a shortage of doctors and increased workload and backlog, the support of highly specialised biomedical scientists will be extremely helpful," explains Patrizia. "I think this is an exciting opportunity for biomedical scientists to progress in their careers and for consultants to have extra support for their routine work." 📧

ABOUT THE ASD IN HISTOPATHOLOGY REPORTING

The ASD was first made available to biomedical scientists at Leicester Royal Infirmary in 2012. It was then expanded to biomedical scientists in other areas of the UK. Since then, 47 biomedical scientists have completed the qualification, which is run by a conjoint board from the IBMS and the Royal College of Pathologists.

As part of the ASD, biomedical scientists can choose to specialise in one of three full specialisms: gastrointestinal, gynaecological or dermatopathology pathologies. The qualification takes a minimum of four years. Candidates work with all potential samples that are collected within their chosen specialism.

Alternatively, there is the option to complete a limited scope ASD in bowel or cervical screening in a minimum of 18 months. The limited scope ASD focuses solely on the biopsy samples that are collected through the bowel or cervical screening programmes. At the moment, 43 people are studying for the full qualification and another eight are doing the limited scope reporting qualification.

A limited scope placental reporting qualification will hopefully launch by the end of 2024.



More information: To find out more about the ASD in Histopathology Reporting qualification, go to: ibms.org/education/advanced-qualifications