A day in the life of...

...student midwife Victoria Blachford, who gives her perspective on training and the challenges of juggling her first year of study with home life

Interview

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e all like to know we are doing a good job and are appreciated and respected – and educators and trainers are no exception. So it is refreshing to look at things from a student's point of view and find out what they think. For this particular student, despite some challenging personal circumstances, she is loving her course, and her tutors and mentors seem to be doing a first-class job.

Victoria Blachford is a 29-year-old first-year student midwife and single mother of three boys aged one, three and four. Her own mother is a midwife, and she had always wanted to enter the profession, but wished to have her family first. It was when her youngest was seriously ill in hospital, aged two weeks, that she re-evaluated her life. She decided she wanted to abandon her career as a bank clerk and finally follow her dream to become a midwife.

She completed an access course and GCSE English while on maternity leave and, despite her college tutors warning her of the difficulty in pursuing a direct-entry midwifery course, she gained a place at her first-choice university, Bournemouth. So in September, she enrolled on the three-year midwifery course and was promptly elected her year’s representative.

Back to the classroom

With time divided between class-based lectures and clinical placements, student life is far from monotonous. Victoria has recently completed a five-week rotation at the Mary Rose Birth Centre at St Mary's Hospital in Portsmouth. “It’s the first time I have ever enjoyed going to work,” she says. Days based in the classroom are structured and more regimented, whereas on placements spontaneous and unexpected things happen. With lectures on the timetable, a typical day starts at 6am, when Victoria gets up and organises her children for school and nursery. Once they’ve been dropped off, she heads to classes in Portsmouth for a 9.30am start. Although she is a student at Bournemouth, her classes take place in the Portsmouth hospital buildings. There are no parking facilities for students, so getting in on time is no mean feat.

The day might begin with an hour-and-a-half lecture on the placenta and a 30-minute coffee break.

Then it’s another hour-and-a-half lecture on another subject, such as embryology. Lunch is from 1pm until 2pm, when a two-hour lecture on the daily health of a neonate might begin. The university days end at 4pm, when Victoria returns to collect her sons. With the children in bed by 7pm, she has an hour to prepare clothes and packed lunches for the following day and a few hours of study time ahead of her. Bedtime is between 11pm and 11.30pm – just enough sleep to get up at 6am the following day to start the routine again.

On placement

Clinical placement days are much longer: 12-hour shifts starting at 7.45am and ending at 8.15pm. Victoria is reliant on her sister coming at 7am to get the children ready for the day – without “her rock”, Victoria would really struggle. Even “break-fast club” childcare wouldn’t start early enough for her to get to the birth centre in time for her shift.

Every placement day has some routine with regards to handover from the night staff and mealtimes, but apart from this, no two days are the same. Victoria will care for women in labour, she might assist with the administration of an anti-D injection, see a client with ruptured membranes, carry out postnatal checks on women with babies in the neonatal unit, sit in on booking visits and answer the telephone. Sometimes a flurry of calls reveals that three women in labour are on their way to the birth centre at the same time. Victoria says: “It can all change at the drop of a hat.” And change is what excites her.

Some students appreciate one-to-one mentoring from the same midwife, but Victoria thrives on input from various people. She says: “I always think of the positives. I have taken the best elements of all these different people to become my own person.” When asked about her favourite aspect of her training, Victoria is adamant that it is being with the women: “I had a fantastic experience of the midwifery service when I was pregnant – it would be nice to know that I can provide that to other women.” And she has nothing but praise for her tutors and mentors, both the midwifery manager choose university, who has accommodated her childcare commitments, and her tutors in the university environment, who are very approachable and whose visibility on the labour ward is reassuring. “Fantastic” is the word Victoria uses repeatedly to describe her student experience so far, but when pressed to reveal an aspect that could be improved, she is honest. “The teaching could be more interactive and the class environment could be improved as the room is small and the desks tiny.” She also highlights the need for “catch-up lessons”. Non-attendance is rare, as everyone on the course has a passion for midwifery. “It’s not like school and having to attend a geography lesson when you have no interest in it,” she says.

Financial pressure

She also fears for the future of midwifery education and the profession as a whole if something is not done to revise the means-tested bursary. It seems to be the real bugbear among her student colleagues from all study years. With no childcare assistance and some students on a bursary of £50 a month, Victoria says: “Those who want to be able to study midwifery for all the right reasons won’t necessarily be able to afford it.”

Discussing the issue with her tutors, she found that the main reason for high attrition rates was financial. Speaking of her own situation, Victoria admits that without the support of her sister and her children’s father, as well as taking on a student loan, she wouldn’t be able to train for her dream job. But, and yet, she wouldn’t really change anything, either. She says: “I love being a student. It is hard. I remember my mother’s tears when she was training and I am not disillusioned about how tough it will be, but I want to give others hope. If I can do it, you can too.”

Victoria was speaking to Emma Godfrey

‘My placement was the first time I ever actually enjoyed going to work’