

'It's not just about the numbers'

Name: Yarlini Roberts

Job title: chief finance officer,
Kingston Clinical
Commissioning
Group



After passing her A levels, Yarlini had planned to do a maths degree at Warwick University, but had a last-minute change of heart. 'I wasn't entirely sure that maths was for me and also whether it was something I wanted to do for the next four years,' she explains. This was disappointing news for her parents, who were clear that staying at home and not studying or working was not an option.

This tough love resulted in Yarlini enrolling on a year's accountancy foundation course at the local university. 'My father and uncle were accountants, but it wasn't something I was really considering as a career. It's fair to say that I fell into it'.

After enjoying the course and finding it relatively easy, she decided to continue with accountancy and in 1989 gained a training post with McIntyre Hudson, a top 20 accountancy firm. Yarlini says this was one of the best decisions she's made. 'It was a fantastic three-year training programme, with different placements every six months. It gave me a good grounding in several different areas and made me realise there were aspects of accountancy I found interesting.' Audit, however, was not one of them and Yarlini was soon looking for her next role.

After she passed her ACCA exams, Yarlini successfully applied for the post of assistant financial accountant at Croydon Community NHS Trust. Undertaking the audits of a private hospital had sparked her interest in healthcare and prompted Yarlini's move to the NHS.

'At the time I wasn't entirely sure I was doing the right thing, but I knew that I could not stay in audit,' she says. The move turned out to be a good one and the start of Yarlini's career in the NHS. 'While there were challenges at the trust, I could really

see I was making a difference.'

She also found the diverse nature of her role enjoyable – 'one minute I was helping sort out the milk tokens, the next I was balancing the ledger'.

A year later, in 1993, she moved to the Bethlem and Maudsley Hospital to gain a promotion to senior financial accountant. The trust was just about to receive trust status and Yarlini recalls it as an exciting time

'I loved it,' she says. 'There was so much going on and the finance team was fantastic. We had to work hard, but we also played hard.'

Again, it was the range of activities



that appealed. 'Every day was different,' says Yarlini, 'from large capital schemes and treasury management to final accounts. I knew if I was working in the private sector I wouldn't get exposure to such issues.'

Not long after she joined the trust, Yarlini received a temporary promotion to deputy director of finance to cover a maternity leave. It was a steep learning curve, but was vital in giving her the confidence to carry out a senior management role.

She recalls one particularly tough time. 'The finance director was on a month's development course and

the other deputy was off because of a family bereavement. I was on my own and thought I wasn't up to it. But I threw myself into it, and I certainly didn't get everything right, but nothing went really wrong either.'

When the deputy finance director returned to work after her maternity leave, Yarlini looked for the next step on the ladder. In 1995 she joined Kingston and District Community NHS Trust as chief accountant, where the challenges were different.

'It was a small trust and there was a question about whether it was viable on its own,' she says. 'There was also a range of skills in the finance department, which tested my management skills'.

Family values

Starting a family in 1997 changed Yarlini's priorities. 'I returned to work four days a week after my first child was born, but my career had to take a back seat,' she says. 'My husband, who's also an accountant, and the main breadwinner, had a job that involved travelling overseas, so we were not able to equally share childcare responsibilities.'

After the birth of her second child, Yarlini decided not to return to work and focus on her family. 'I just couldn't manage it all. I felt as if I wasn't being fair to my family or my colleagues,' she explains.

Having a third child led to a three-year career break. But it wasn't long before she was missing work. 'I loved spending time with the children, but I needed more. I needed to be intellectually challenged', she says.

A solution presented itself in the form of a two-day-a-week short-term role working at the Queen Elizabeth Hospital NHS Trust (now part of Lewisham and Greenwich NHS Trust). A former colleague

at the Bethlem and Maudsley had recommended Yarlini for the role. She joined the trust in April 2002 and her first task was putting together the 2001/02 final accounts.

'I worried whether I was up to it – for the past three years my head had been full of *Teletubbies* and the *Wheels on the Bus*. But it was great to be properly using my brain again.'

While the work was enjoyable, the commute proved difficult and at the end of 2002 she moved to Kingston Primary Care Trust, again on a two-day-a-week basis. The role initially focused on providing commissioning finance support for learning disability and mental health, but the introduction of the new GMS contract provided Yarlini with an opportunity to immerse herself in the intricacies of primary care commissioning.



"Things are constantly changing and I really do

think that it is a great time to be working in commissioning"

As her children got older, she took on additional responsibilities and increased her hours – a flexibility she believes would not have been possible in the private sector. 'The NHS has treated me well and enabled me to develop my career alongside bringing up my children,' she says.

By the time of the PCT's demise in March 2013, Yarlini was assistant director of finance. She helped to lead the establishment and authorisation of Kingston CCG.

It was at this point that Yarlini began to think seriously about whether she wanted to become a chief finance officer (CFO). 'I realised that I had been doing the work of a CFO but not necessarily getting the credit

for it,' she says. 'Also, the children were of an age where they were needing me less and less'. As a result, she became head of finance at Wandsworth CCG. 'I'd been working at Kingston for such a long time,' she says, 'I realised I needed to get senior commissioning experience elsewhere in order to get a CFO position.'

Wandsworth CCG was particularly attractive because it is the host of the South West London Collaborative Commissioning, with all six CCGs in the area working together to transform services so that they are sustainable and provide high-quality care for patients.

Yarlini particularly enjoyed working on the estates modernisation consultation across mental health trusts in the area – 'it is really important to create buildings fit for the 21st century, so that patients are safe and make a full and speedy recovery'.

When Kingston CCG advertised for an interim CFO, Yarlini knew she had to apply. She secured the job in January 2015 and since then her appointment has been made permanent.

She is optimistic about the future. 'Things are constantly changing and I really do think that it is a great time to be working in commissioning. At the moment, we are focusing on co-commissioning, which will result in much needed changes to patient pathways. It is essential so that the local health economy is sustainable.'

Yarlini is just as clear about her contribution. 'My role is to evaluate the opportunities, help to manage the risks and make sure that the necessary governance frameworks are in place,' she says. 'It doesn't always make me popular, but I think my colleagues respect that I am always open and honest.'

She concludes: 'When you become a CFO the accountability suddenly hits you. It's a huge responsibility, but also a huge honour. I would recommend working in NHS finance to anyone considering a career in accountancy. It's not just about the numbers; it's about doing the best for the patients.' ◉

CURRICULUM VITAE

Employment history

Qualifications ACCA

1989	McIntyre Hudson, trainee
1992	Croydon Community Unit, financial accountant
1993	Bethlem and Maudsley NHST, senior financial accountant
1995-1999	Kingston and District Community NHST, chief accountant
2002	Queen Elizabeth Hospital NHST, assistant FD
2002	Kingston PCT, various roles, inc assistant FD
2013	Wandsworth CCG, head of finance
2015	Kingston CCG, chief finance officer

Outside interests

As a mother of three teenagers, Yarlini says she has little free time. But she keeps fit by taking her dog for long walks in the Surrey countryside and attends a regular pilates class. She also likes holidaying in Cornwall and France.

Favourite book *A Town Called Alice*, Nevil Shute

Favourite film *The Godfather*

Best career advice 'It is good to be open and honest, but think before you speak – I don't always remember to do this'

Alternative career 'I would like to have my own vineyard, but I'm not sure that there would be enough wine left to sell'