UNIQUE AND EXCITING JOBS

Working as a paramedic while living with a stoma

Kelly Jarvis (50) lives in a small village in Derbyshire with her husband, two daughters, three cats – and a lizard. Here she explains what it is like serving as a paramedic while also living with a stoma



I had my ileostomy formed in January 2004 due to having ulcerative colitis from 17 years old. The medication I was on at the time wasn't keeping me in remission and, feeling that my quality of life was becoming poor, the option of stoma surgery was put forward. The decision of whether or not to have surgery was left to me as there were options of trialing other medicines, but I felt that this was the best option for me.



> The surgery went really well, but I had a portal vein clot post-surgery and ended up in hospital for longer than I expected. Due to having a subtotal colectomy, the ulcerative colitis returned in the small amount of rectum that I had left, so I made the decision to have a full proctectomy six months after my original surgery, making my ileostomy permanent and non-reversible.

Life as a paramedic

I have been a paramedic since 1998 after leaving school. At that point, I had already had ulcerative colitis, but it was well managed and had no impact on my job. The decision to have my stoma occurred while I was still working as a paramedic, but in a specialised role within the 'Hazardous Area Response Team' (HART). This team specialised in working with patients that are in difficult areas, including heights, confined spaces, water, or whenever there are chemicals or hazards involved and includes wearing breathing apparatus and harnesses.

I chose this role as it involves the skills that I originally had while using these in difficult areas while working within a team. I currently work as a paramedic on an ambulance after making the decision to move on from the HART team.

> Being a paramedic gives you the ability to make a difference in people's lives that could impact them forever.

A day in the life...

My current day-to-day working role as a paramedic includes responding to emergency calls in a vast array of incidents and many different patients. This can vary throughout the day, from very minor issues to then responding to major incidents.

For instance, I have responded to a gentleman in cardiac arrest where, as a team, we were able to resuscitate him resulting in an amazing outcome - the patient was discharged from hospital to then live a normal life. This kind of response is both life saving and life changing and brings an amazing amount of satisfaction and pride in your work.

On the front line with a stoma

After having my stoma formed, I felt anxious about going back to do my job. A stoma is something that takes a lot of adjusting to and sometimes can be unpredictable. As it's something that can't be seen, the team working with you is often unaware of the issues that can occur.

> Due to the nature of my role at the time, there were many instances where issues would come up, such as wearing a harness for long periods of time, climbing through confined spaces, and working within hot environments which cause you to sweat more than normal.





Making staff members and managers aware of my stoma increased awareness and gave others the ability to understand when issues could occur, and to make adjustments when needed. For example, wearing a slightly different uniform or having different equipment to other members of the team if needed, so as to change the fit of the uniform or where equipment sat on my body.

I found that I had to consider what I ate and when, so as to regulate my output, and to stay fully hydrated to reduce fatigue. I also had to make sure that I always had spare pouches and sometimes had to use whatever was available to make sure my pouch was attached as well as it could be. For example, using flange extenders when needed.

Managing stoma-related incidents while under pressure

I have had issues where I have actually forgotten that I had my ileostomy while pulling myself over rubble to gain entry to a patient due to being so focused on the task at hand. This caused my pouch to be pulled off. Making everyone around me aware that this had happened made this incident easier to deal with as others were able to take over my task so that I could take time away to sort out the issue.

Advice for other ostomates considering taking on a unique or challenging role

Having a stoma isn't always easy. It is difficult to comprehend at first. Sometimes the feeling that you will never cope will be with you, but everything is attainable - it just takes time and patience. Being open with those around you and making reasonable adjustments will ensure that any job is within your reach.



Final thoughts...

I feel that once you have taken on board that life with a stoma is not always easy and that issues can occur, you then also realise that there's always a way around these things. You become more willing to take help from others.

> My role as a paramedic is my career and my stoma is just part of me – it didn't define me or change who I am or what I can achieve.