Working in a Clinical Trials Unit

(based on information collected from senior statisticians based in three different UK Clinical trials Units)

How essential is a statistics degree?

A degree in a numerate subject, ideally statistics, would be needed.

An MSc in medical statistics/epidemiology would also be of benefit, but not essential, especially if you already have some Clinical Trials Unit experience. If you have attended relevant training courses that would also be useful.

A PhD is not essential, although without one, progression to a high level may be limited in some units.

CStat (Chartered Statistician) might be helpful but definitely not essential.

What are the job prospects?

There is not usually a shortage of trial statistician jobs.

Most contracts are likely to be 1 or 2 years, as they are dependent on funding, but they are usually renewed.

Most units have career progression (e.g. junior, senior, lead statisticians), developing an area of expertise may be required, and progression may be slightly easier at larger units.

Are specific statistical methods required?

It will depend on the focus of the unit, but a knowledge of different phases of trials, randomisation techniques, intention to treat analyses, adaptive designs, and a range of analysis techniques (survival analysis, missing data imputation, causal inference) would be helpful. Specific statistical training can also be done on the job. There are likely to be a variety of tasks, some very statistically demanding, but others more related to administration/data management.

Is knowledge of the clinical area required?

Strong statistical skills are the most essential, knowledge of the subject area is a bonus.

Is it important to have publications?

A publication record commensurate with level of experience may be expected i.e. not many (if any) if you are junior, several (preferably in good journals) if you are more senior.

What other skills are required?

Good communication skills (will need to be able to explain statistics to clinicians),

Ability to work independently and in a multidisciplinary team,

Attention to detail,

Good organisation,

Flexibility/adaptability (could be working on a range of tasks including protocol development, sample size calculations, database design, data cleaning, data monitoring reports, final analysis, publications, on a variety of different trials at a similar time).

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