Physician Associate in General Practice

Physician Associate (formerly known as Physician Assistant) is a rapidly growing healthcare role in the UK, working alongside GPs and doctors and surgeons in hospitals. Physician Associates support doctors in the diagnosis and management of patients. They are trained to perform a number of roles including: taking medical histories, performing examinations, analysing test results, and diagnosing illnesses under the direct supervision of a doctor.

New roles such as the Physician Associate present opportunities to tap into a previously untapped potential workforce. The development pathway for a Physician Associate stems from a different place to many other healthcare roles creating an opportunity to create a valuable new addition to the workforce without draining the existing pools that are near depletion.

On a national level there is a growing demand for Physician Associates and the number of education programmes and students has increased significantly in the last few years. Student numbers have increased from 107 to 577 from 2014 to 2016 according to the Faculty of Physician Associate’s census results.

This growing workforce presents a significant opportunity to overcome shortages elsewhere and build a sustainable workforce fit for the future.

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What roles might a Physician Associate undertake in Primary Care?

There is no limit to the roles that Physician Associates can have in primary care. Upon qualifying they will be able to manage most of the on the day cases that present to primary care and with time they can expand their experience to manage chronic conditions, undertake home visits, manage paperwork and other clinical administrative tasks. Within the UK there are already examples of Physician Associates being a partner in a GP surgery – which demonstrates their potential for progression and the value they can add to the practice clinical team.

The only current limitation is that Physician Associates cannot currently prescribe or request ionising radiation and this is because the role is currently non-regulated. This is currently being reviewed by the Royal College of General Practitioners with a view to becoming regulated.

Physician Associates will generally need to work under the supervision of a GP whilst they are in primary care, although they will be able to see patients and do home visits unaccompanied, they will need access to a doctor to discuss challenging cases. Experience of Physician Associates in primary care to date is that they learn very fast and can quickly manage a very impressive portfolio of cases and some very challenging situations.

The career path chosen by people who train to be Physician Associates is one that prioritises patient facing services, and to this end Physician Associates tend to want to remain loyal to a population and develop excellent professional relationships.

When a practice needs someone who cares about people and will deal with the clinical demands put on the practice, a Physician Associate may just be the person they’re looking for.

For more information on what a Physician Associate can do visit:

There are huge benefits to training our future workforce locally, mostly the increased chances of retaining that workforce for the longer term. By setting up Physician Associate programmes in Dorset we can ensure that we have a steady supply of newly qualified healthcare professionals looking for work in Dorset’s healthcare system year after year.

Having programme providers within the county will also increase our capability to offer further development and growth within our system.

A local programme would require the support of local providers in both primary and secondary care to provide clinical placements. Students require a total of 1440 hours in clinical attachments over a 2 year period. Based on the Competence and Curriculum Framework (2012) that equates to 6 weeks in primary care, 12 weeks in secondary care, 6 weeks in emergency medicine, 3 weeks in general surgery, 3 weeks in mental health, 3 weeks in obstetrics and gynaecology and 3 weeks in paediatrics in an acute setting.

Local Endorsement

The Primary Care Workforce Centre fully support the integration of Physician Associates in our healthcare system bringing their valuable skills and knowledge to our workforce focusing on patient contact and management.

The Primary Care Workforce Centre are supporting the setting up of a local programme to give Dorset the best chance of training, retaining and growing Physician Associates locally.

How to get involved

If you are interested in offering training placements, recruiting a Physician Associate or getting involved in the conversation please contact the Primary Care Workforce Centre.

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