

Five case studies illustrating how PAs (Physician Associates) in Sheffield can support patients and teams in general practice

Ria Agarwal Email: r.agarwal@shu.ac.uk

What we know about primary care:

- Mental health presentations are rising, especially in COVID-19¹
- GPs are overwhelmed by demand²
- Happier staff are likely to be better at their jobs, and provide safer and more effective patient care

The five vignettes below taken from a cohort of PAs in Sheffield at varying stages of their career demonstrate the benefits of having this workforce member:

Assessing and 'holding'⁹ patients, Chris Bamber, PA-R Started in March 2018 as a Preceptorship PA at Dovercourt surgery, now has a dual role in primary care and Haematology

"40 year old male had a breakdown at work and was sent home. He became increasingly suicidal and wanted to hang himself from a doorframe with an IKEA bag, leading his wife to cut all the handles off the bags in the house. He presented to me very tearful and clearly in crisis, so I referred him on to the crisis team who saw him within 2hrs. I rang him the next day to follow up, and initiated Mirtazapine. I give him 1-2 weekly support calls and have signposted him to local support services such as Andy's Man club."



Boosting staff morale and mental health with a vegetable garden at Birley Health Centre Hannah Smail, PA-R Started in March 2020 as a Preceptorship PA at Birley Health Centre

"We decided to create a vegetable garden using some wild garden space at the practice. We planted a few things from seed and staff brought in shoots they had started growing at home to be planted. I enjoyed looking after it daily as it kept my mind busy when I was missing family and friends. It was great to share the produce with staff, mangetout was the most popular. We had grown beautiful flowers too which brightened up the area where we can sit outside for lunch"

Vegetables from our garden:



Reflection on the value of being a 'wounded healer' Ria Agarwal, PA-R Started in November 2013 as a PA, now dual role in primary care & Senior Lecturer at SHU, and ad-hoc input into Sheffield preceptorship PA scheme

"As my experience in primary care has grown, I feel comfortable in assessing and managing varying complexities of mental health presentations. Having been in one practice now for some years, I have good rapport and continuity with many patients; ranging from depression, to functional illness and personality disorder. Observing mental illness in my family alongside personal experience of bereavement and loss has increased my ability to truly empathise with patients, alongside initiating and reviewing antidepressants. Additional training and personal experience of coaching and counselling has enabled me to utilise similar techniques to increase the therapeutic power of the consultation; especially as we are in an era where mental health is rising, as is the demand for IAPT. I am happy to be able to take this workload off the GP's hands where possible, as these patients can be more time-consuming, and it is fantastic to know I have the skillset to help in this way."

What we know about PAs:

- Trained in the medical model with 1400 placement hours including Psychiatry and GP³
- May have life experience but lack clinical exposure
- Anxiety and depression are '1As' on the PA curriculum⁴
- 5900 PAs estimated by end of 2023⁵ and previous literature on doctors satisfaction with PAs⁶ and preceptorship schemes⁷
- Transition to remote consultation during COVID-19 has been challenging for newly qualified PAs who trained prior to pandemic and have little exposure to remote working⁸

How former experience has helped me, Melody Sibanda, PA-R Started in March 2018 as a Preceptorship PA at Firth Park surgery

"Prior to working as a PA I was a GCSE Science teacher, which has given me an understanding of children's development at different stages; this is invaluable for paediatric consultations. I have a basic understanding of child psychology and behaviours which has led me to take a lead role in children's mental health and Learning disabilities in our practice. My experience has also enabled me to be Deputy Safeguarding Lead, and I communicate regularly with teachers and SENCOs at local schools on behalf of the practice"



Reflection on transition to remote consultation, Clara Hardcastle, PA-R Started in Sept 2020 as a Preceptorship PA at Sothall Medical Centre

"As mental health consultations are talking only, there isn't the extra layer of thinking to do regarding how to adapt parts of it for remote consultation. I find making phone calls to people I don't know anxiety-provoking, so starting consultations in this way has helped in boosting my confidence."



References: 1 Covid-19 and the future of mental health in primary care BMJ 2020;369:m2520 <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.m2520>
2 <https://www.gponline.com/increasing-numbers-gps-suffering-burnout-depression-during-covid-19-outbreak/article/1683827#:~:text=Some%2030%25%20of%20GPs%20responding,the%20same%20survey%20in%20April%203>
<https://www.fparcp.co.uk/about-fpa/news/covid-19/covid-19-update-on-student-clinical-placement-hours> 4 Matrix specification of core clinical conditions for the Physician Assistant by category of level of competence <https://www.fparcp.co.uk/examinations/overview> 5 <https://www.bma.org.uk/advice-and-support/nhs-delivery-and-workforce/workforce/medical-associate-professions-briefing> 6 Satisfaction of doctors with the role of physician associates Williams L, Ritsema S Clin Med 2014 DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7861/clinmedicine.14-2-113>
7 Preceptorship scheme for newly qualified PAs working in general practice in Sheffield Hoskin J Agarwal R <https://www.rcpjournals.org/content/clinmedicine/20/6/e255> 8 Remote consultations for Physician Associates in primary care: qualitative feedback from a regional cohort study (pending publication) 9 Holding relationships in primary care; a qualitative exploration of doctors' and patients' perceptions' Cocksedge S et al. British Journal of General Practice 2011; 61 (589): e484 e491. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp11X588457>