

Introducing Physician Associates to the 2-Week-Wait diagnostic pathways in the Wessex Cancer Alliance

The demand for cancer services currently outstrips its supply primarily due to lack of human resources needed for its provision. Hence, there is an identified need to introduce new roles to support the current gaps in the cancer workforce and aid service delivery. Accessing the Physician Associate (PA) workforce to the 2 Week-Wait (2WW) pathways could be a way to tackle the problem.

Physician Associates are a relatively new and ever growing cohort of medical professional who have a wide skill set, that can not only add capacity to the cancer teams, but could also provide much needed continuity to help the recovery of diagnostic pathways affected by the Covid – 19 pandemic.

Studies have shown that PAs are versatile and safe members within clinical teams without drawing from the workforce of other professions. Members of cancer units in other regions where PAs are already well established, report that PAs positively contribute to the running of the service and are generally well accepted within the multidisciplinary team.

The aim of this project is to foster the use of PAs in the 2WW pathways of the departments of colorectal, breast, urology and gynaecology. This is initiated by the provision of 12 months start-up funding for nine PAs who will be deployed in relevant departments across the WCA.

In partnership with departmental stakeholders, the project will be overseen by a workforce manager as well as two experienced PAs, who will provide support and monitor progress from the application phase to the compilation of an impact report at the end of the funding period.

During this process the team will aim to create an 'Implementation tool kit' leading to a standardization of job descriptions and person specifications of the role and the development of a work plan that is appropriate to PA's skill set. Furthermore, a core competency framework will be compiled also aiding career progression.

The impact report aims to guide decisions on follow-up financing through the home trusts, but could also indicate how the role could fit within the cancer workforce in the future.

Evaluation Project

Evaluation of the PA's impact on their department will be by quantitative and qualitative measures including:

- Tailored questionnaires to PAs and different stakeholders
- PA's 7-day-Work diaries
- Departmental performance data

Furthermore, post-holders will receive a broad-based training during monthly regional teaching sessions and will also be supported via their PA Peers to address department specific learning needs and ensure parity of core skills across Wessex.

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