



General Practice Nurse (GPN) career pathways

In the space of 30 years, general practice nursing has undergone a massive transformation. It has shaken off its image as a workforce comprising GPs' wives helping out to become an essential component in delivering primary health care.

The increase in the transfer of work traditionally done in secondary care to primary care has resulted in new opportunities and responsibilities for nurses in general practice. However, the legacy of a rapid increase in prominence is that career pathways are not as established as they are in other areas of nursing.

One aim of the Working in Partnership Programme, (WiPP) General Practice Nursing Project, was to improve the career pathway so that nurses see general practice nursing as an attractive option. WiPP has also worked to encourage practices to support nurse development at local level as well as being involved national level strategy and policy.

Importantly, WiPP's career framework has been supported by the government initiative 'Modernising Nursing Careers', which seeks to update the career choices for nurses in the health service.

Today there are a number of diverse career possibilities for a nurse entering the profession.

From an entry post – where GPNs can be involved in health promotion, giving advice, dressings, ear irrigation and vaccinations – a nurse can develop into a senior GPN.

After a minimum of two years' experience as a GPN and an accredited degree-level programme in practice nursing, there is the scope to work towards a Nurse Practitioner (NP) level. This would build on the existing role by introducing an element of leadership over others in the practice and nurse led care without routine doctor intervention. NPs' work can also include first contact care with some GP support.

As clinical and management skills develop, some nurses may choose to become a lead GPN. This involves responsibility for ensuring the delivery of safe and effective nursing care to the whole of the practice population. The GPN will manage all nursing resources and work closely with the practice manager and GP partners to deliver practice priorities.

From there, nurses can progress to an Advanced Nurse Practitioner (ANP) which typically would require less GP support during first contact care. ANPs can also lead on practice policies and clinical guidelines as well as teaching junior staff or medical students. They can also take on autonomous management of long term conditions as well as refer patients direct to specialists.

Increasingly there are newer options as general practice evolves.

As GP practices no longer have to provide out of hours services, many PCTs are developing a nurse led service, with the appropriate doctor backup. This again provides new career possibilities for nurses. Out of hours work can be particularly attractive to those who wish to continue working while raising a family.

Another possibility for GPNs includes becoming a nurse partner in a practice alongside GP colleagues. Clinical activity will vary but nurse partners are expected to invest money in a practice, have involvement in income generation and share in the decision making of a surgery. They will also have full on call accountability.

In return, the nurse partner will usually benefit from a proportionate share of profits. As well as the appropriate clinical skills, nurse partners are

expected to have knowledge of financial and business systems in general practice.

From this kind of post, a GPN facilitator could progress to be a GPN professional lead and provide advice and guidance to the PCT or strategic health authority on nursing issues. GPN professional leads can also have responsibility for performance management and clinical governance relating to GPNs in an area.

Another career route is to become a specialist GPN. This may involve running nurse led clinics in a specific disease area and providing advice and guidance to the practice on creating guidelines and policies on such conditions. The specialist GPN would also design and undertake clinical audit as well as taking an education role for other GPNs and community nurses.

Inevitably, the increasingly diverse nature of general practice nursing has led to a rapid escalation of educational opportunities. Those who are keen to get involved in shaping the next generation of GPNs can also become lecturers, designing and delivering education programmes for nurses.

It is clear that general practice nursing has already evolved into a career that can accommodate a variety of skills and interests at all levels, and it will continue to develop.

The last three decades have seen huge changes in general practice nursing. The next 30 years are set to be even more exciting.

Those wishing for a copy of the WiPP Career Framework or Standards for General Practice Nursing please contact Sue Cross, Practice Nurse Advisor, Londonwide LMCs at sue.cross@lmc.org.uk.