

Universities Launch First Major UK Training Programme for Physician Assistants

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The Universities of Wolverhampton, Birmingham and Warwick with Coventry are to launch the first large scale courses to train Physician Assistants in the UK.

Physician Assistants will be an entirely new healthcare role in the UK, working alongside doctors in hospitals and in GP surgeries, although they are a well established profession in the United States

Physician Assistants will support doctors in the diagnosis and management of patients. They will be trained to perform a number of roles including: taking medical histories, performing examinations, diagnosing illnesses, and analysing test results under the direct supervision of a doctor.

The new Postgraduate Diploma in Physician Assistant Studies will initially offer training for at least 60 students, with courses starting at Birmingham and Wolverhampton in January 2008. The course, which is supported by NHS West Midlands (Strategic Health Authority), involves intensive training over two years, with students studying for 46 weeks each year.

In 2003 a small number of General Practices in the West Midlands became the first in the country to employ US trained Physician Assistants. This pilot proved very successful and there are now over twenty Physician Assistants working in the West Midlands and a total of 50 across the UK.

Jim Parle, Professor of General Practice from the University of Birmingham's Medical School, said: "This new profession will supplement the existing NHS workforce, increasing the number of frontline clinicians available to treat patients.

Physician Assistants will always support the work of doctors, not replace them. However, having an additional clinically trained member of staff has the potential to really benefit patient care. Certainly the experiences of General Practices which are already using US trained Physicians Assistants have been very positive."

The Physician Assistants curriculum includes many of the same elements as the standard four or five-year medical programme. However, it focuses principally on general medicine in General Practice and hospital settings, rather than speciality care. As well as significant theoretical learning in the key areas of medicine, the course also includes 1600 hours of clinical training in a range of settings including general hospital medicine (350 hours) and mental health (80 hours).

Dr Neil Johnson, Associate Clinical Professor in Medical Education from the University of Warwick, comments: "The training programme we have put together provides an excellent grounding in general medicine. This reflects the need for Physician Assistants to work in support of practitioners across the medical profession.

In the United States Physician Assistants are well established, working across the health service from Family Practice to emergency medicine. We have tried to develop a curriculum that will allow PAs to be just as versatile in the UK, supporting the NHS wherever they are needed."

Phil Begg, Associate Dean for Primary Health Care from the University of Wolverhampton, which has been running the first UK course, adds: "We particularly hope that this role will offer new and attractive opportunities for people to switch into a health-oriented career later in their working lives.

We have worked closely with key national bodies like the Department of Health, Royal College of Physicians and The Royal College General Practitioners to develop a role that enhances current health services and most importantly will provide benefits for patients."

Professor Steve Field, Head of Workforce and Regional Postgraduate Dean for the NHS West Midlands Workforce Deanery and local GP, said: "This is the largest course for physician assistants to date and we are delighted to be leading the way in developing this valuable role. Having 60 newly trained physician assistants in the West Midlands will mean even more capacity for physician teams and even better patient care."

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Interviews with students currently on the University of Wolverhampton's programme are available on request.

Prospective students, please see link above for further information.

NOTES TO EDITOR

Physicians Assistant will be a new role for the NHS in the UK

The primary source of recruitment into the rigorous university provided courses will be graduates with a science orientated first degree. Other healthcare staff who have a first level qualification in, for example, nursing, physiotherapy may also apply to universities providing the education to become a Physician Assistant.