University backs up calls for more Physician Associates to transform acute medicine

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Academics at the University of Birmingham have welcomed the **Future Hospitals Commission report** calling for the development of the Physician Associate role in acute medical settings – as the University prepares to relaunch its postgraduate diploma which trains graduates in the profession.

The postgraduate diploma in **Physician Associate Studies**, which begins in January 2014, will be one of only three courses of its type in the UK – but the Royal College of Physicians report, launched today, recommends developing the use of Physician Associates, as is the case in the USA where there are over 86,000 Physician Associates.

The new, two-year University of Birmingham course is being run in partnership with University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust to ensure that postgraduates studying on the course can benefit from both theoretical and clinical learning, within the UHB Trust and at several others across the region.

Physician Associates support doctors in both hospitals and GP surgeries, and are trained to perform a number of roles including taking medical histories, performing examinations, analysing test results, and, under the supervision of a doctor, diagnosing illnesses.

University staff have taken a key role in developing the PA profession at a national and regional level, in response to needs identified by local healthcare providers. Staff who run the programme have welcomed the Future Hospitals Commission report in recognising the valuable contribution the role can make to a medical setting, and how it can help to transform the way acute medicine is run.

Professor Jim Parle, Professor of Primary Care at the University, is the course lead, and said: "We are delighted that the RCP has recognised the potential of this new role in delivering safe high-quality care for NHS patients and are very excited at being part of this development."

The Physician Associate curriculum includes many of the same elements as the standard four or five-year medical programme. However, it focuses principally on general medicine rather than specialty 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). Students who wish to train to become a Physician Associate will typically need at least a 2:1 in a life sciences degree such as biology, medical sciences or physiotherapy.

Alexandra Curran is a Physician Associate at Queen Elizabeth Hospital Birmingham. She graduated from the University's former Physician Associate course in 2011.

She said: "Becoming a Physician Associate has been both rewarding and challenging. I have been working on an Acute Medicine unit since I graduated two years ago and I continue to learn and gain responsibility as an established member of the multidisciplinary team .

"Due to the continuity of care that Physician Associates can offer we can improve both the organisational operation of a unit and the direct patient care provided. I am continually told of the benefits that physician associates offer to the unit and hope that these will increase as the role is better recognised and supported."

Professor Phil Begg, Head of Academic Innovation at University Hospitals Birmingham said: "UHB is pleased to be partners in the relaunch of this important programme. The Trust already employs a number of Physician Associates, and is excited about supporting the students through their clinical exposure, they will be working in the best environment with world class clinicians, in world class facilities. Physician Associates will be key players in a 21st century healthcare workforce, we welcome this report."

Notes to editors

For more information on the Physician Associate course at the University of Birmingham, go to the **course homepage**.

Prof Jim Parle, Prof Phil Begg and Alexandra Curran are available for interview. Contact **Kara Bradley**, University of Birmingham press office, 0121 414 5134 or 07789 921163 for more information.

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