



Assistant practitioners get the job done

North of England Cancer Network

Staff are recruited as assistant practitioners in chemotherapy services and gain a foundation degree in supportive and palliative care as well as training on the job.





Background

The assistant practitioner role was introduced in the UK in 2002 to complement the work of registered professionals across health and social care (Mackinnon and Kearney, 2009). An assistant practitioner is a healthcare worker who has completed a two year foundation degree and who assists registered practitioners, such as nurses, physiotherapists, radiographers, podiatrists, dieticians, podiatrists, health visitors and social workers in delivering high quality health care. Assistant practitioners deliver protocol based clinical care and undertake a range of activities, previously within the remit of registered practitioners (RCN, 2007). There is a range of services across health and social care where the assistant practitioner supports social care roles and carries out follow up assessments and interventions.

Assistant practitioners work above traditional support worker roles as they have a recognised academic and work-based qualification. It is widely recognised that the expanding health and social care workforce needs to be developed within a recognised career framework in order to meet the needs of patients and deliver on the quality, innovation, productivity and prevention (QIPP) agenda, (RCN, 2007), (Spilsbury et al, 2009, 17 (5), pp. 615-626).

Skills for Health worked in partnership with the National Cancer Action Team and Department of Health to develop a range of chemotherapy workforce initiatives. They produced transferable role templates, including one outlining the role of a chemotherapy assistant practitioner, see Links section below.

Aims

This project aimed to:

- develop and pilot a foundation degree programme for assistant practitioners in chemotherapy services
- examine how health and social care interface
- identify workforce development lessons for both sectors.

There was some support from Skills for Care for this project but there was also significant investment from the North of England Cancer Network to implement these roles and cover the costs of releasing staff to attend university.

What was done?

Supportive care represents a significant proportion of the workload in chemotherapy units. It was anticipated that expanding the role for support workers to undertake some of this work would release registered nursing time to perform more complex procedures and assessments and enable more efficient and effective use of the skill mix.

This project identified a range of base line measures related to specific aspects of the job role, eg holistic patient assessment, cannulation etc, and which would be used to evaluate the introduction of the assistant practitioner.



Outcomes

The project achieved the following outcomes:

- five staff were appointed to work as assistant practitioners in chemotherapy services at three sites across the cancer network
- they studied at Teesside University and completed a foundation degree in supportive and palliative care
- they received training in a range of roles to support chemotherapy services, this included: phlebotomy, cannulation, holistic needs assessment, urinary catheterisation, chemotherapy side effects and symptom assessment
- the students reported they felt more confident in the full range of activities as a result of the course
- on completion of the programme and role induction, the job roles were re-evaluated to reflect the extended skills using the NHS Agenda for Change job evaluation and all were upgraded to a higher grade.

“This role gives me more responsibility and I can relay information back to the nurse about the patients, for example if they aren’t eating, or are losing weight, I can try and do something about it. In this new role I can refer them to a dietician. I can do the things straight away and they are not left to the next day shift.” **Assistant practitioner.**

Impact

Impacts include:

- this role frees up qualified and specialist nurses to deal with more complex care
- expansion of the role for support workers to undertake some of this work has enabled a more efficient use of staff resources
- there is evidence that patient appointment times have been reduced by 20 minutes on average; given that oncology patients often experience fatigue and have to undergo long treatment regimens this is a significant benefit
- patients and carers have benefitted from receiving more face to face time from assistant practitioners
- career progression was created for health care staff, as well as benefiting care delivery.

Similar initiatives report these impacts from the assistant practitioner role:

- South East Scotland Cancer Network has enabled patients to receive some services closer to home (McGowan and Campbell, 2010)
- projects in the north west have shown that the assistant practitioner can refer to: care managers to increase care packages; occupational therapists for equipment, such as wheelchairs or home adaptations; social services for carer assessments and to benefits advisors to sort out finances; this supports the social workers in the team and can save resources.



Next steps

The course will continue to be available, although this is a very limited workforce as there is usually only one health care assistant on each unit who would be eligible to apply.

The North of England Cancer Network will continue to review the effectiveness of the role as part of their ongoing audit processes.

References

Mackinnon and Kearney, 2009

Mackinnon I and Kearney J; Assistant practitioners: scoping exercise: a report to Skills for Health, Mackinnon Partnership, London, 2009.

www.workforce.southcentral.nhs.uk

McGowan and Campbell, 2010

McGowan, D and Campbell, K; Enhancing Care: Developing the Assistant Practitioner's Role. Cancer Nursing Practice, Vol 9 No.2, 2010.

Royal College of Nursing, 2007

The regulation of health care support workers, Policy Briefing, RCN, London, 2007. www.rcn.org.uk/policy

Spilsbury et al, 2009 Spilsbury K, Stuttard L, Adamson J, Atkin K, Borglin G, McCaughan D, Mckenna H, Wakefield A and Carr-Hill R; Mapping the introduction of assistant practitioner roles in acute NHS (hospital) trusts in England, Journal of Nursing Management, 17 (5), 2009.

Contacts

www.westsussex.gov.uk

Links

Skills for Health Core standards for assistant practitioners, Skills for Health, Bristol, www.skillsforhealth.org.uk

Transferable Role Template for Chemotherapy Assistant Practitioner

<http://www.skillsforhealth.org.uk/images/stories/DocLib/chemo%20assistant%20practitioner%20level%204%20final.doc>

Further information

For further information about the health and social care integration work between Skills for Health and Skills for Care please contact:

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