

Key Benefits of Pharmacists Working in General Practice January 2024

Summary

“Health and Wellbeing 2026: Delivering Together” outlined how pharmacists would work as an integral part of the General Practice surgery team using their skills and experience to improve patient outcomes, improve the safety of prescribing through medication reviews and reconciliation, reduce the level of medication errors and reduce waste through management of prescribing systems. “Delivering Together” also highlighted the potential for pharmacists working in general practice to use their clinical skills to help to alleviate some of the pressures faced by general practice through the management of long-term conditions.

In 2015 the Department of Health made a five-year commitment to invest in a General Practice Pharmacists (GPP) service, introducing new roles for pharmacists to work alongside GPs. Full implementation of the service was achieved by 2020, and today every GP practice in Northern Ireland has a pharmacist working as an integral part of their clinical team.

A full evaluation of the GPP service demonstrated that this investment represents very significant value for money, with £39.5m of efficiencies delivered against a target of £41.3m (96% of target) on the money spent on prescribing medicines in primary care. This is in addition to delivering vital non-monetary benefits through improvements in the safety, efficiency, effectiveness and consistency of prescribing within GP practices and in releasing GP capacity to focus more of their time on the care and management of patients with complex medical needs.

Informed by this evaluation, the Department of Health has now developed “GPP NI 2030 – A strategy for General Practice in Northern Ireland” which outlines ambitious plans for the future development of the pharmacy sector in primary care. This plan sets out how GPPs will contribute fully to optimising the health outcomes of our population as the clinical leads for medicines within the general practice team. It also sets out an ambition to develop and expand the workforce through the introduction of new advanced pharmacist practitioner roles, which will allow GPPs to enhance their clinical skills and expertise with greater benefit to patient care. Other future service development priorities will be supported through expansion of the pharmacy team in general practice to include pharmacy technician roles.

Main Benefits of Pharmacists Working in Practices Identified



(i) Each GP practice now has a pharmacist (GPP) in their clinical team

Every GP practice in NI now has a GPP working with them as an integral part of their clinical team. GPPs are experts in medicines and work within the practice team to support the safe and effective prescribing of medicines. They are involved in a wide range of tasks in which they use their clinical knowledge and expertise to achieve better health outcomes for the population from the use of medicines.



(ii) Managing patient medication reviews

Regular medication review is an important part of patient care in general practice, particularly for patients who are very unwell, and/or being prescribed a large number of medicines, and is vital in helping people get the most benefit from their medicines. GPPs engage directly with patients to carry out comprehensive medication reviews and to help people make informed decisions about starting or stopping medicines. They do this by considering all aspects of a patient's health and aim to find the balance between the benefits and risks of each medication, as well as possible alternatives to taking medicines. This includes considering medicines that are no longer required or appropriate, medicines that would be beneficial but not already prescribed, if a combination of medicines are or have the potential to cause harm and advice on various aspects of each medicine to help patients gain a better understanding of their medication.



(iii) Managing hospital discharge information



Communication failures when patients move between healthcare providers can lead to unintended harm and potentially to unnecessary readmission to hospital. This is largely preventable with effective and consistent medicines reconciliation, and GPPs are central to the delivery of timely medicines reconciliation when patients are discharged back to the care of their GP from another care setting, such as a hospital. The pharmacist uses their clinical expertise and knowledge of medicines to identify an accurate list of a person's current medicines by comparing them with the current list in use, recognising any discrepancies and documenting any changes, resulting in a complete and appropriate list of medicines that is accurately communicated to all healthcare professionals involved in the person's care.

(iv) More efficient use of health service funding for medicines



Close to £500m is spent each year on medicines that are prescribed in primary care, which is one of the largest expenditures within the Health Service. Some of these costs are due to the needs of an aging population with complex health needs, and they are also linked to deprivation levels. However Northern Ireland uses more of almost every type of medicine than anywhere else in the UK, placing huge burdens on our health services as they struggle to meet patient expectations and demands for medicines. GPPs have a key role in ensuring that Health Service resources are used in the most effective way such as by supporting regional initiatives to reduce waste, choosing the most effective and cost-effective choices and prescribing generically where appropriate. The contribution of GPPs has resulted in around £40m of savings which can be reinvested in other treatments and services that would be more beneficial to the care of patients.

(v) Appropriate choice of medicines for patients e.g. antibiotics



A notable area of work in which GPP involvement has been crucial is the appropriate prescribing of antibiotics. Antimicrobial resistance is known to be one of the top global public health and development threats which if unchecked could result in approximately 10 million deaths per year globally by 2050 – more than cancer and diabetes combined. It is largely driven by the inappropriate use of antibiotics, for example in the treatment of a viral infection where they will not work. Using antibiotics unnecessarily can mean that antibiotics no longer work when needed in future and puts people at risk of more severe or longer illnesses. GPPs have helped to maximise safe and effective prescribing of antibiotics through ongoing clinical audits and by providing advice to both prescribers and patients on the most appropriate use of antibiotics. This work contributed to an overall 34.2% reduction in the prescribing of antibiotics in NI over a 5-year period.

(vi) Safe prescribing systems in general practice



GPPs conduct an annual review of the prescribing processes that take place within their respective GP practice. This covers the journey of a prescription from when it is ordered and how it is generated through to the prescription leaving the GP practice. The review also looks at processes essential to the safe prescribing of medicines such as how medicines are appropriately added to a patient's medical record, how ongoing monitoring (e.g. blood tests) related to a particular medicine are managed and identifying which patients would benefit from a medication review. Implementing and regularly reviewing a robust prescribing system within a practice is paramount to patient safety and helps to;

- Promote high quality, safe prescribing
- Minimise potential risk of medication error that can expose patients to harm
- Identify any risks associated with the process
- Reduce medicine waste
- Improve overall effectiveness and efficiency of prescribing



(vii) Helping with GP practice workload

The presence of GPPs in General Practice helps to relieve work pressures on other clinical staff working in the GP practice, including GPs and nurses. This allows practice staff, most notably GPs, to focus more of their time on the care and management of patients with complex medical needs. GPPs are the first point of contact within the practice for



medicine related queries from both patients and other Healthcare professionals.

