

Nurses in General Practice: What they do and why they matter

General Practice Nurses throughout the country have stepped into the limelight during this most extraordinary year of COVID-19. In the face of challenge and uncertainty they have provided a reassuring and constant presence - adapting their ways of working; providing face-to-face care for patients despite risks and restrictions; being ready to answer the call to administer vaccines the moment they were approved.

Never has it seemed more appropriate to take a proper look at the vital role of nurses in general practice – to look, and to fully appreciate the significant value that they create every day, in every community, for every one of us.

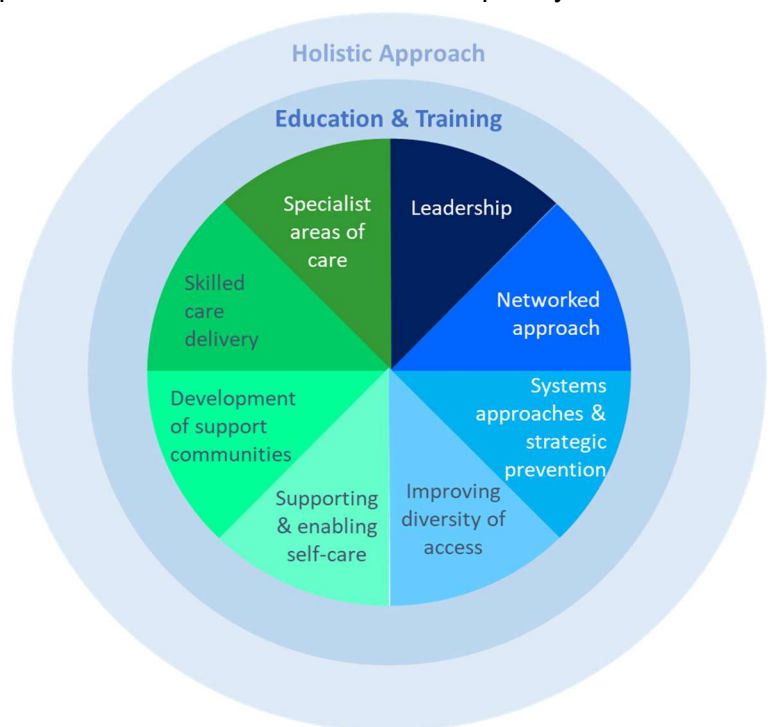
Nurses are a key part of the general practice team – on average they make up nearly a third of the general practice clinical workforce, and most practices simply can't imagine getting by without them. General practice nurses (GPNs) are highly skilled professionals, educated to a high level and carrying out a wide range of specialist roles within their practices and beyond. They are an extremely versatile workforce - one which is uniquely placed to deliver significant levels of value – to the practices they work in, the patients they care for, local communities and the whole of the NHS. However, on the whole they remain relatively invisible whenever the media and others refer to general practice. The need to raise the profile and value of these highly skilled professionals has become an urgent issue in light of the current workforce challenges and the demand on primary care as we move forward during the pandemic recovery.

How GPNs create value

Research commissioned by NHS England and NHS Improvement and completed by Sonnet Advisory & Impact in collaboration with Sheffield Hallam University in Spring 2021* has, for the first time, explained what it is about GPNs that is so valuable and that makes them such a key part of general practice today and a vital component in the planned development of the NHS.

The research shows how GPNs are leading the way towards the future of primary practice as they work alongside GPs, Physiotherapists, Pharmacists, Phlebotomists and other healthcare professionals – all experts leading care in their field, supporting their patients and each other in multi-disciplinary teams. The research found that GPNs create value through a set of 8 distinct factors as illustrated by the segments making up the central circle in the diagram:

- **Leadership** – in multiple forms, including in clinical, management and development roles within the practice, regionally, and nationally; in making decisions and leading care across the range of general practice work; and in specialist fields
- **Networked approach** – sharing expertise and insight both within and beyond the practice, so that patients get the care they need and that service delivery benefits from best practice wherever it originates
- **Systems approaches and strategic prevention** – understanding the



progression of diseases, their causes and outcomes; designing and delivering education and prevention programmes; taking a health population view to improve health at community level

- **Improved diversity of access** – providing a complementary and different approach to that of GPs and other healthcare professionals, that is more appropriate to some patients and situations
- **Supporting and enabling self-care** – recognising that health conditions are mostly managed at home and supporting patients to play their part in staying well
- **Development of support communities** – helping patients to tap into support from those around them, either by signposting or facilitating support
- **Skilled care delivery** – competence and confidence based on robust training and a wealth of experience
- **Specialist areas of care** - developing individual areas of excellence and responsibility.

These 8 factors - which can be drawn on individually or in combination - are called Value Drivers and are supported by two enabling factors (shown as rings around the central circle). The enabling factors - strongly in evidence in the work of GPNs, and key to the skilled use of the Value Drivers themselves - are:

- The nature of **education and training** of GPNs, which prepares them for working independently and flexibly in a role which demands a wide range of skill, and deep expertise in certain areas of specialism
- The **holistic approach** of nurses – patient-centric and grounded in a realism, pragmatism and curious enquiry.

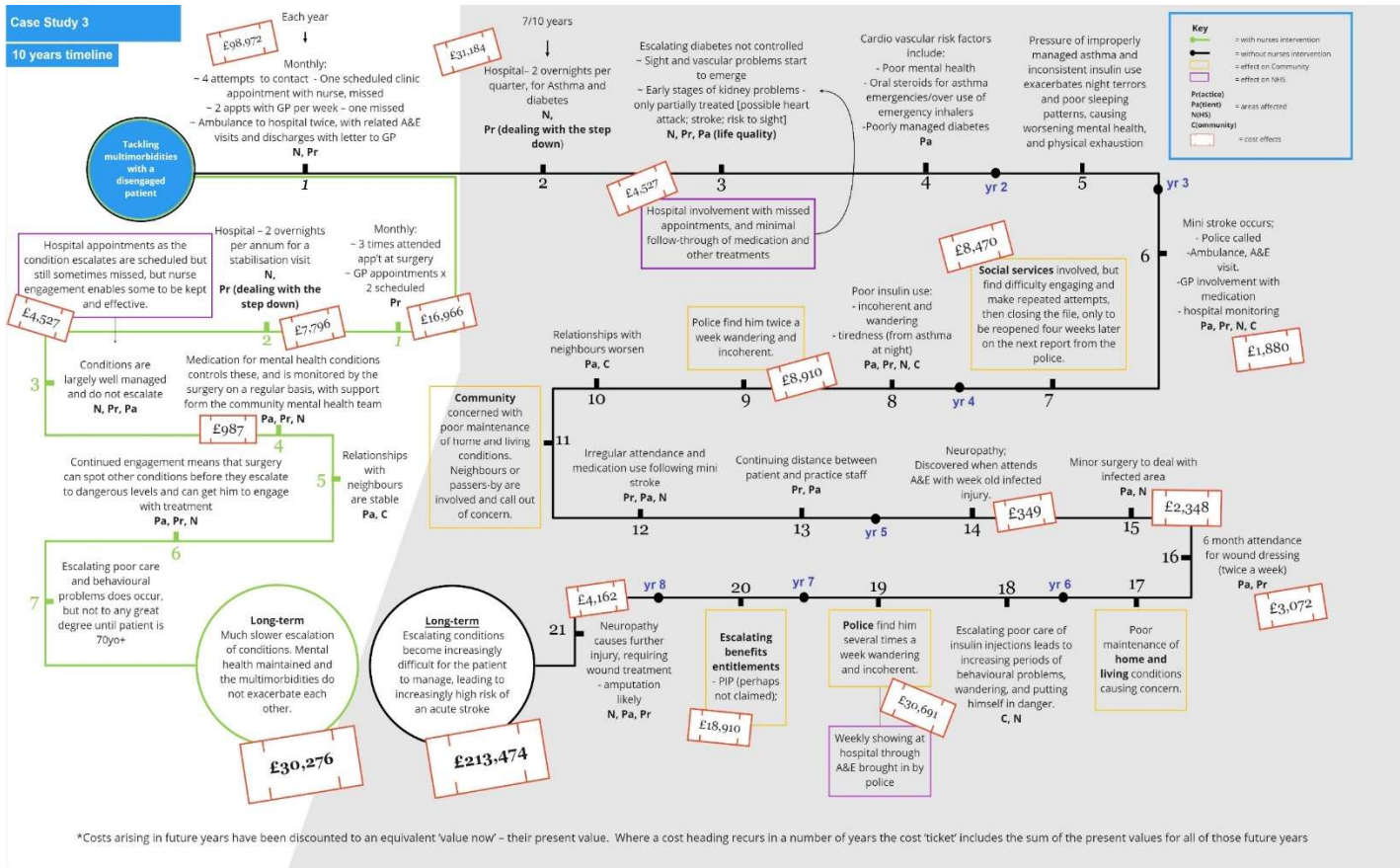
Of course, other healthcare professionals have some of these factors at their disposal too, but research shows that it is this particular combination of value drivers that makes GPNs unique. Nurses in general practice have all 8 of them and draw on them constantly, skilfully and intuitively. It is a skillset and a role that is hard to substitute – the whole genuinely is far greater than the sum of its parts.

Illustrating the value of GPNs

GPNs are hugely valuable - because the work they do, and the way they do it, leads to better outcomes. The value is felt in four distinct arenas: the GPN's **practice**, their **patients**, the wider **community** and the **NHS** as a whole. Outcomes in these four arenas of value might include better health overall, reductions in 'flare-ups' of chronic conditions, wounds or post-operative sites that heal better, or a programme of care that manages multiple needs in streamlined appointments. Often the nurse is the one professional within the practice that the patient feels able to talk to informally, disclosing information that is the key to unlocking better health, identifying the need for screening or diagnostic tests, or for recognising mental health or other support needs.

The benefit of the GPN role is illustrated in the diagram on the next page which shows the difference between the health 'journey' of a patient that resulted from a GPN being involved in their care, compared to what might reasonably be expected to have happened without the GPN involvement. Each event on the two journeys being compared is allocated a 'ticket' indicating the cost of that event. The diagram's key explains who pays those cost, and therefore who benefits from GPN support to the patient. Other examples, with more illustrations of the values brought, are shown in the full report.ⁱ

The patient has multiple health conditions, and without nurse intervention these are badly managed, resulting in a poor quality of life, disrupted by multiple acute episodes, A&E visits and hospitalisations. Under the care of a GPN, however, the patient is supported to manage their conditions more effectively in a way that works for them and gets the care that they need in a coordinated way. As a consequence their health improves, their life and that of their family and support network is better as the patient's condition is better managed, and the practice is using valuable resources to best effect.



Managing health at primary care level with the help of the local community and with patients actively engaged in their own health and wellbeing is a cornerstone of the future NHS, which benefits from both cost savings and increased capacity as a result of fewer acute episodes and conditions that deteriorate more slowly. An ageing population and increasing demands on the health system as a whole form the backdrop of a fundamentally new NHS operating model (emerging through delivery of the NHS Long Term Plan) which sees the majority of care being delivered through primary practice and through prevention work at community level. The model is well suited to GPNs, whose skills, capabilities and pragmatic approach to enabling and delivering care will become a lynchpin of primary practice. That being the case, it is critical that the profession is properly recognised and resourced for the future.

An under-resourced profession

This branch of the profession is a hugely rewarding and satisfying one - offering scope for progression, choice and autonomy that simply isn't available elsewhere in the NHS, as well as an opportunity to really get to know patients, their families and circumstances and to see the difference that GPNs make in their lives and health outcomes. General practice nursing is an exciting career opportunity that is hiding in plain sight and deserves to be better understood. The myth that GPNs provide a handful of basic care and support services could not be further from the truth - the role has evolved over recent decade (often by 'stealth' and without full recognition) to one that forms the core of primary practice care delivery, encompassing a wide choice of specialisms and a full breadth of clinical expertise and responsibilities.

Yet, despite patients and colleagues increasingly benefitting from GPNs leadership and care management, the role is still misunderstood by many other NHS professionals and by the general public, whose perceptions are often limited by their own direct experience. General practice is too rarely a 'first choice' career, and many nurses make a move to general practice only in mid-career, often because the role is flexible enough to fit around family life and other commitments. Newly qualified nurses are rarely encouraged to enter general practice, and most of the participants in the research said they did not understand what a GPN did before they became one themselves.

GPNs are an integral part of the NHS system, but they are employed directly by the practices themselves - each practice operating as an independent small business and delivering services under contract to the

NHS. The fact that practices decide for themselves how many nurses to employ and with what specialisms means every practice is different, and there is huge variation in working arrangements, terms and conditions. This creates a particular dynamic around recruitment and resourcing that sets GPNs apart from their colleagues – roles are in the main advertised on private job boards, not NHS ones, so can be difficult to find and calibrate against others, and the professional support framework (formal and informal) that exists in settings with larger numbers of nurses at various career stages is one which GPNs re-create for themselves by networking, and by forming and working in teams that extend beyond the practice itself. For nurses who want to explore and define the boundaries and development of their own career it is a hugely liberating model, and one in which the 8 value drivers identified by the research can be exploited to full potential.

Realising the potential – a call to action

The potential value of GPNs cannot be achieved through their own efforts alone. The research has identified a number of barriers that are already limiting the potential, and that pose a real risk of compromising the effectiveness of the NHS primary care system – not least the fact that the profession is not attracting enough new recruits. If the value of GPNs is to be harnessed for the benefit of all, the following issues must be urgently addressed:

1. Pathways into general practice must be made more visible and easier to access, with practicalities such as continued employment whilst training being standardised, and with permeable boundaries between growth trajectories;
2. The role as it is today needs a full re-appraisal in order that the size and scope of the role is properly recognised and that GPNs are provided with the resources, networks, information and authorities that they need to do the job well;
3. Recruitment and training programmes should reflect the enhanced understanding of the GPN role and how GPNs create value, actively promoting the unique nature of the role and creating a workforce that acknowledges its own value and addressing the current prevailing tendency to ‘take it for granted’;
4. Nurse training courses should include modules to equip GPNs with the leadership and entrepreneurial skills needed to work in an SME environment and manage their own career paths within the primary care setting;
5. Line management of nurses by non-clinical managers should be balanced with by a professional support infrastructure that works across a whole Integrated Care System, ensuring resourcing and development meets system-wide needs;
6. The GP contract, which currently makes no provision for the nursing workforce, should align to NHS Agenda for Change terms and conditions making these transparent with reduced variation;
7. GPNs should be actively recruited to PCN and ICS boards and management committees, allowing the system as a whole to benefit directly from their insight and expertise, whilst providing GPNs an appropriate leadership opportunity reflecting that expertise;
8. GPNs should be given the status that is rightfully theirs, with measures taken to raise public awareness of the skills and expertise of today’s GPNs, to remove subliminal messaging that they are less valuable than other professionals (for example, enhancing their positioning on practice websites), and to challenge misleading representation of GPNs in the media.

Quite simply, general practice nursing has been a ‘Cinderella’ profession for too long. The role has developed organically in breadth and depth over the years without proper recognition or celebration of that fact - to the extent that it is now a vital but under-resourced profession. Changes to clinical approaches outlined in the Long Term Plan and elsewhere imply further responsibilities for primary care to come, and much of that will be delivered or co-ordinated by nurses. Plans to recruit more general practice nurses are to be applauded, but investing in the profession makes little sense without investing in the infrastructure that supports it.

* Research commissioned by NHS England and NHS Improvement and carried out by Sonnet Advisory & Impact CIC. Sonnet Advisory & Impact CIC is a company registered in England & Wales (number 12328935) and a member firm of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England & Wales. Registered Office: 45 Flitwick Road, Ampthill, Bedfordshire, MK45 2NS; Website: www.sonnetimpact.co.uk. ‘Sonnet’, ‘Sonnet Advisory & Impact’, ‘Sonnet Impact’ and ‘Sonnet Advisory’ are trade names of the Company.

ⁱ The full report *Leading the way: The role and value of nurses in general practice in England* is published at: <https://sonnetimpact.co.uk/research-and-publications/>