

GPNs can build general practice capacity

The general practice nurse is now a key healthcare professional within the multidisciplinary general practice team, writes Róisín Doogue

THIS YEAR I CELEBRATED my 20th anniversary working as a general practice nurse (GPN) in a rural practice in Co Kildare. It's a great time to reflect on the many changes that have taken place in general practice and the positive impact we have on the lives of individuals, families and communities.

We are all aware of the challenges we face within general practice, including an ever-increasing workload, difficulties in recruiting and retaining both GPs and GPNs, health inequalities, waiting lists, poor infrastructural supports... the list is endless. However, we are a resilient, strong, capable workforce who have demonstrated how quickly we can act, react and adapt to changing health needs. We are all looking forward to putting the pandemic behind us, but one positive to take from the past two years is an acknowledgement of the essential role played by general practice teams, in terms of looking after the healthcare needs of the population when other services were closed, and our role in the administration of more than half of the Covid-19 vaccines.

General practice nursing has evolved over the past 30 years from a task-orientated position to that of a key healthcare professional within the multidisciplinary general practice team. Since the first subsidy for general practice nursing was introduced as part of the GMS contract in 1989,¹ the number of GPNs in Ireland has increased from 102 in 1994² to around 2,000³ today. The scope of health reform outlined in Sláintecare aims to improve the delivery of truly personalised healthcare that is quality assured and delivered at the right place and time.⁴ To deliver this vision, practice teams will need to expand considerably, with an increase in the number of GPs and GPNs employed in general practice. Expanding the specialist role of the GPN and providing educational opportunities that support an advanced practice role is key to delivering the Sláintecare vision.

GPNs deliver a comprehensive range of healthcare services to their practice population, including disease prevention, health promotion, cervical screening, immunisation, chronic disease management, wound care and a range of complex general nursing services.⁵ They are also leaders in the development of practice standards, guidelines and protocols, infection control, education, audit and research. Although this specialist GPN role is essential to the delivery of everyday healthcare, there is scope for further development of this role for nurses who wish to progress their careers and take on advanced roles. International evidence suggests that advanced GPN roles strengthen general practice while providing safe care and an improved level of service.⁶

Unfortunately, there is a major barrier preventing many nurses from considering general practice as a career; namely, a lack of funded education leading to advanced



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practice roles and the absence of a clear career pathway when compared with their secondary care or public health nursing colleagues. Overcoming this barrier could substantially increase the complexity of care offered by the GPN to provide advanced assessment, treatment and prescribing skills leading to an increase in services and alleviating some of the pressure on their GP colleagues. Advanced practice roles are advocated by both GPNs and practices.⁵ The time has come to address the education and career needs of GPNs in order to develop the specialist nursing workforce.

The 2022 WONCA World Rural Health Conference in Limerick in June is an opportunity to bring together the key stakeholders including the ICGP, Irish General Practice Nurses Educational Association (IGPNEA) and policy makers. Its theme, 'Improving Health, Empowering Communities', challenges attendees to share ideas, information and research, and influence policy decisions that could set the foundation for general practice and primary care, where the Sláintecare vision of personalised healthcare is shared.

This conference encourages the creation of empowerment opportunities, supporting individuals and communities to have more control over their health and wellbeing. The conference sub-themes encompass a variety of topics that not only affect rural healthcare but all our communities. There is a practice and community nursing sub-theme in this conference, highlighting the importance of this role and creating an opportunity for real exploration of role expansion and advancement. It is an opportunity to endorse the WONCA 2019 Albuquerque Statement, recommending full-scope nursing practice, building nursing leadership by inviting nurses to the table at all levels of policy-making forums and expanding education to include general practice-based contextual learning, helping to build an expert GPN workforce.⁷

My aspiration is that the WONCA 2022 Limerick Statement will build on the pledges in the Albuquerque Statement, transforming them into action plans that will help transform general practice nursing nationally and internationally. [i](#)

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References on request