Could physician associates be the answer to the ophthalmic workforce crisis?

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INTRODUCTION

We anticipate a considerable NHS workforce shortage over the next 20 years as a result of aging population, training insufficiencies and political forces. Figures projected suggest a 44% rise in glaucoma cases, 50% rise in cataract and a 59% rise in age related macular disease over this time. Ophthalmology has accepted the need to increase our recruitment of allied health professionals into hospital eye services (1). However, Physician Associates (PAs) a relatively new group of healthcare professionals in the UK (2-4) are yet to exist in the ophthalmic workforce.

WHO ARE PHYSICIAN ASSOCIATES?



PA's are a unique group of medical professionals who can be trained to undertake management of subspeciality disease, including surgery with adequate support and supervision. The profession was first introduced in the UK in 2003 as a pilot from USA. There are currently 2,486 qualified PA's. PA's grew in number when the Faculty of Physician Associates (FPA) launched with the Royal College of Physicians and the UK Association of Physician Associates (UKAPA)(5). They now represent the fasted growing group of healthcare professionals.

36 universities offer PA Studies in UK, consisting of a 4-year undergraduate or 2-year postgraduate programme. On completion of national exams they can then practice in the UK.

PAs currently work across 46 specialties. Most commonly these include General Practice (38%), Acute Medicine (10%), Emergency Medicine (9%) and Geriatric Medicine (4%). In the USA PAs already work within ophthalmology but this has yet to be seen in the UK. PA's in USA currently undertake; intravitreal injections, minor surgeries and clinical work. Their role could include management of both ocular and systemic disease as a result of their unique training. The General Medical Council is soon to start regulating PA's which will expand their role.

Moorfields Eye Hospital (MEH) currently offers bespoke ophthalmology training for students undertaking MSc in Physician Associate Studies at Queen Mary University Hospital, London. Through our teaching programme we wanted to understand from the PA students what inspires them and what is impactful about our programme that may be utilised in the future development of a formal training programmes.

AIM

Collect feedback on PA experiences in order to inform a new pilot program (with a view to encouraging enrolment in the ophthalmic setting).

METHODS

PA students participated in a series of semi-structured interviews designed to provide an insight into their perception of career opportunities within ophthalmology as well as their perceptions of their training experiences. A thematic analysis was undertaken to identify commonalities on learning experiences and perspectives of ophthalmology as a career. Collective data was shared with students to verify it was representative of their experiences.

PA STUDENTS EXPERIENCES



RESULTS

Five PA students with no prior ophthalmic experience enrolled into the study, completing a 90 minute interview. Students consented to sharing their anonymised data. All students expressed 'apprehension,' on commencing their placements. All students departed declaring an interest in career paths within ophthalmology. Acute ophthalmic services were identified as the most desirable place to work. Eighty percent reported that they would be motivated to undertake procedures including laser, minor surgeries and intravitreal injections. All students requested more exposure to acute services.

CONCLUSIONS.

PA students who experienced an opportunity to train with the Moorfields and UCL Institute of Ophthalmology education department were all motivated to undertake a career in ophthalmology.

PA's demonstrate huge potential to meet the subspeciality gaps in our ophthalmic workforce. They also bring new ideas, perspectives and a detailed understanding of chronic and common systemic diseases to our medical field. Embracing and developing training programmes through national channels would allow further exploration of the role of PA's in our future.

CONSIDERATIONS

Outside of ophthalmology foundation year trainees have reported training opportunities being diverted away towards PAs(7). Careful integration is needed to avoid negative disruption for trainees and our other allied health care professionals.

PA's offer adaptability and flexibility due to their unique training. Significant numbers of unfilled ophthalmic vacancies exist for allied health professionals which could be integrated into the role of an ophthalmic PA. With record numbers of nurses departing the NHS and a bleak workforce outlook, PAs with HES should be seriously considered(8,9). The RCOphth in partnership with Moorfields and other pilot sites are hopeful that we will start training the ophthalmic PA workforce in the near future.

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