

TAKING OUR WORKFORCE INTO THE FUTURE

THE PATHOLOGY PRACTICE EDUCATOR NETWORK

Martyn Hicks and Michelle Payne on the introduction of pathology practice educator roles and the achievements to date.

The requirement to return to business as normal post pandemic and cope with an immense backlog of hospital appointments and their associated diagnostic investigations is well documented. The *Diagnostics:*

Recovery and Renewal report by Richards, published in 2020, noted the need for increased diagnostic activity alongside new models of diagnostic service delivery. This included recognition of the need for investment and innovation in facilities and equipment but most importantly workforce. These

recommendations were further supported by the *Pathology Get it Right First Time (GIRFT) Programme National Specialty Report*, published in September 2021. The report, among many well-publicised recommendations, noted the challenges faced by the pathology workforce and advocated ways to upskill and create a more diverse and flexible workforce. Both reports underpin *HM Government: Life Science Vision*, published in 2021, which set out the vision to develop a highly skilled workforce and strong pipeline of talent across sectors, including the NHS, to include improved uptake of apprentices as one potential inclusive pathway to a life science career.

New roles

In 2020, as part of The National Pathology Workforce Rapid Intervention Plan, new pathology practice educator (PE) roles were introduced on a regional basis. The aim of the roles was to support the increase of pathology laboratory scientific and support workforce delivering COVID-19 testing in response to the continuing global pandemic and beyond into recovery. Each region took a different approach to the design and remit of the role, with the introduction of PEs, apprentice leads and strategic workforce leads (all of which, for the purpose of this article, we will address as PEs). In total, 18 PEs were appointed across NHS England on a one-year fixed-term contract connecting hospital trust pathology networks and regions across England.

Missing link

It is recognised that pathology managers and training leads can struggle to keep on top of training, recruitment and retention initiatives due to work pressures that were amplified during the pandemic. In addition, active and effective relationships between laboratories, education providers, funding providers, network leads and other key stakeholders, which support such initiatives, can be variable and inconsistent across England. The

development of a national network of PEs has created powerful and influential relationships between these stakeholders and, importantly, has created channels of communication that previously struggled to exist, or didn't exist at all. This has provided a vital, and some would argue, previously missing link, not just regionally but nationally, and has improved sharing of good practice and innovation.

Progress

So, what's been achieved so far, what's ongoing and what about the future?

- PEs have carried out the first comprehensive regional and national training needs analysis of the pathology workforce, identifying areas for investment, development, and new ways of working. This has fed into the national pathology board, helping to shape workforce strategies and planning.
- In some areas, PEs are playing a critical role in developing pathology networks aligned with the recommendations of the NHSEI pathology maturity matrix.
- Collaborative work between PEs and HEE has supported networks and trusts to increase numbers of undergraduate placements and STP and HSST candidates.
- PEs facilitated and guided access to HEE and NHSEI funding to support upskilling of support staff with non-accredited degrees to HCPC registration. This has resulted in the progression of 72 laboratory support workers in the South West alone.
- Working with HEE, the IBMS and education providers, PEs continue to make a significant impact on the visibility of career pathways through schools and colleges.
- PEs continue to promote and increase access and uptake of clinical progression routes, including STP, HSST and also histopathology advance practice qualifications.
- HEE data has shown an increased uptake of biomedical/laboratory science apprenticeships

across England since the uptake of PE roles. Apprentices are now increasingly being included in pathology workforce plans and business cases across trusts.

- Recognising the need for resource, sharing a one-place stop for training, education and development and a place to connect, PEs are creating regional, but nationally networked, NHS Future platforms, supporting a networked approach to training, as recommend in the Richards report.
- PEs have facilitated network collaboration and sharing of information resulting in establishment of groups that take workforce strategies and projects forward.
- PEs are supporting equitable and transparent access to funds and programmes for professional development across all grades of pathology staff. They are building communities of practice and sharing information through newsletters and network lunch time seminars. This supports an improvement in working culture and morale. Staff are feeling more supported and listened to.
- Mutually supportive relationships have been developed between the IBMS and PEs, enabling the development and progression of required training and education for the profession via workforce feedback. This collaboration has been universally welcomed and has already produced positive actions moving forward.



The future

It's clear the PE network has been the missing link to connect organisations and stakeholders to support the pathology

workforce and work towards increased capacity and sustainability. Lines

of communication have exploded into life, when previously they either didn't exist or struggled to produce positive outcomes. There is still much to do. The successes observed so far require consolidating as new projects and collaborations begin in a continuous stream of plans, strategies, and initiatives. The outcomes rely on a continued positive and constructive dialogue between stakeholders, with PEs as their central, knowledgeable, and networked point of contact.

The PE role in pathology is a multifaceted one that extends from training to strategy writing and delivery. As such, since its inception, the PE network continues to have a much greater influence on workforce change than was originally envisaged.

Whether you are a lab manager with recruitment and retention strategy and planning challenges, a band 2

support worker looking to move into team leadership, a biomedical scientist wanting to develop more clinically or a student with training queries, contact your lab lead or HEI provider to get in touch with your network PE. Please continue to watch this space for further updates on your PE network. This is just the start of a bright future for the pathology workforce. 

Martyn Hicks is the Regional Pathology Apprenticeship and Educational Lead for South West England. **Michelle Payne** is the Strategic Pathology Workforce and Education Lead for North East and North Cumbria.

FEEDBACK

"Thanks for your support, I absolutely appreciate all the work you do for all of us. You are talking positively and providing solutions and contacts to improve our future – it is music to my ears."

"Having you both is making a big difference in areas we never thought would be possible to improve."

"Can't thank the team enough for this opportunity, really given staff something to feel excited and work towards. Histopathology being particularly exciting as the first STP programme of its kind in the South West."