Effective communication: The key to the successful implementation and development of the Assistant Practitioner role
Karen Dutton

CITATION
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Abstract
This paper describes an aspect of the introduction of the Assistant Practitioner role into the NHS. The authors set up a series of forums for assistant practitioners to discuss issues in establishing their role and for managers and mentors to discuss and support the development of the role. The paper describes the process for setting up and running these meetings and the impact they had on the introduction of Assistant Practitioners to the trust.

Keywords
communication; assistant practitioner

Introduction
The role of the Assistant Practitioner has been developed in community services in Cumbria for over six years. Despite experiencing various challenges over this time, Assistant Practitioners have become a vital part of raising and maintaining good patient care within our area.

A number of drivers have led to the emergence of the Assistant Practitioner role. From the statutory requirements of the European Working Time Directive (Department of Health, DOH, 1996) and the NHS Plan (DOH 2000a) to the demographic changes of the 21st century affecting both local and national health provision (Macleod, 2007; Fairgrieve, 2009; Kraszewski, 2009). Other local (NHS Cumbria, 2009) and national frameworks (DOH, 2009) have led to an increased need for registered practitioners to be able to free their capacity through role re-design and flexible approaches to working (DOH, 2000; DOH, 2001a; DOH, 2001b). The Foundation Degree in Health and Social Care is a two-year course that has been commissioned by NHS Northwest (University of Central Lancashire, 2010). It aims to provide a flexible interdisciplinary course, with an emphasis on ‘fitness for practice’, which bridges the gap between theory and practice. It has been designed to meet individual and organisational requirements in the health sector through the integrated development of vocationally and academically relevant knowledge and skills. The course is designed to be flexible enough to facilitate trainees to gain knowledge and skills for their area of practice. The programme includes a range of academic and work-based modules designed to cover a range of skills and knowledge required by support staff working under supervision. Common themes, important in all areas of health and social care are embedded throughout the course. These include:

• Health promotion;
• Collaborative working;
• Psychology of health and illness;
• Lifelong learning and skills development;
• Evidence-based practice; and
• Equality, diversity and service user involvement.

It has to be acknowledged that there can often be considerable obstacles to the implementation of this role that are common to national and local implementation. These include lack of role definition; no clearly identified scope of practice; and poor understanding of the Assistant Practitioner role. All of these have led to resistance in some areas due to concerns about safe delegation, supervision and accountability (Benson, 2005; Mackey, 2004; Mackay & Nancarrow, 2005; Royal College of Nursing, RCN, 2009; Selfe et al., 2008; Vaughan, 2008). However, it has been argued that the benefits of embedding the Assistant Practitioner role in practice are considerable. Benefits to practice were identified from improved patient satisfaction (Selfe et al., 2008; Willson, 2006) to enabling registered practitioners to be able to develop their own roles and utilise their time more effectively on more complex care assessments and treatments (Willson, 2006; Selfe et al., 2008; Fairgrieve, 2009).

As a result of the these challenges at a local level we needed a way of enabling those involved in the Assistant Practitioner development to raise their concerns in a structured framework. Clear communication frameworks have been identified as key for the effective implementation of the Assistant
Table 1: The aims of the Managers & Mentors and Assistant Practitioners & Trainees Forums

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Managers &amp; Mentors Forum</th>
<th>Assistant Practitioners &amp; Trainees Forum</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Provide structure to the role development of Assistant Practitioner through process</td>
<td>1. Provide an opportunity to network with other Assistant Practitioners and</td>
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<tr>
<td>systems</td>
<td>Trainees and share experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. To improve communication regarding the role</td>
<td>2. To discuss issues that are affecting Assistant Practitioners and Trainees</td>
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<tr>
<td>3. To provide support and information to enable the effective implementation of the</td>
<td>with regard to their development</td>
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<tr>
<td>role</td>
<td>3. To provide support and information to enable the effective implementation of</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. To provide an opportunity to share best practice</td>
<td>the role</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. To ensure an action plan is agreed to address the problems and concerns raised</td>
<td>5. Assistant Practitioners’ representatives (elected by this group) will attend</td>
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<td></td>
<td>mentor/manager forum and ensure that their views are accurately portrayed and</td>
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<td></td>
<td>considered in developing the role further</td>
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Practitioner role (Benson, 2005; Selfe et al., 2008). This motivated the Project Leads to set up the Assistant Practitioner Forums. It was decided that there would be two meetings on the same day, each one would be an hour and a half hour duration, one meeting for the trainees and Assistant Practitioners to voice their concerns to the Project Leads and a second meeting on the same day to discuss with mentors and managers the challenges they were facing around the implementation of the role and to make them aware of the issues raised by the Assistant Practitioners/ trainees. This forum was chaired either by the Workforce Development Manager who was also the senior manager named as the ‘Assistant Practitioner Champion’ for the Trust or, in her absence, the Professional Lead for Nursing. The Associate Director of Nursing has also attended when required. This was important, as it was felt that this level of management would be required for any proposals to be addressed and supported at a strategic level.

The Assistant Practitioner Forums
The purpose of these forums was set out at the start, so everyone had a clear view of what the goal were (see table 1) and initially ran every 4-5 weeks. The meetings provide the participants with the opportunity to share concerns, best practice and network and also gain useful information about local and national initiatives affecting the role development. Two qualified Assistant Practitioners were elected by the group to represent their views at the managers and mentors forum.

The meeting for managers and mentors provides an opportunity for key issues to be highlighted. This often involves a particular service development issue, for example, role development and training to support more complex wound care, medication administration, etc. It provides a forum to discuss the professional issues/concerns raised around these developments and an action plan is then agreed as to how to move the issue forward. Feedback is then provided at the next meeting or emailed to all interested parties. As the Assistant Practitioner role within the Trust is diverse, the forum also provides an arena for registered practitioners from a range of professional disciplines to clarify issues and concerns around the cross-boundary challenges that they face. The Assistant Practitioner Forums have been established for nearly two years. They have provided an opportunity to clearly identify the main obstacles to local development. It has also raised the profile of our Assistant Practitioners who provide an invaluable contribution patient care delivery. This has led to a deeper understanding by managers of what the role involves and how it can benefit their service. It has also provided an opportunity to tackle incorrect assumptions and inaccuracies in information being passed on by some registered practitioners within the Trust.
Effective communication key to implementation and development of Assistant Practitioner role

The Assistant Practitioner Forums are now held every eight weeks as many of the initial obstacles have been tackled, but are now two hours duration. The Assistant Practitioner and trainee meeting now has 30 minutes for agenda items and then the following hour is used as a professional development workshop covering some of the generic/career development topics. These are sometimes led by the Assistant Practitioners themselves with support from the Project Leads, if required.

Conclusions
Developing a framework that encourages communication across professional boundaries from the bottom to the top of the organisation has helped to gain a better understanding of the day-to-day challenges that this new role development brings, but provides also an opportunity to meet those challenges in a proactive way. Effective communication is the key to the successful implementation and development of the Assistant Practitioner role.

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References


