Dedicated pastoral lead for doctors in training

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University Hospitals Bristol NHS Foundation Trust

What was the problem?

Doctors in training need career guidance at an early stage in their career when choosing a run-through programme, as the Department of Health’s report, Modernising medical careers,¹ revealed.

What was the solution?

University Hospitals Bristol (UHB) appointed a careers lead, a role that developed into a pastoral lead as doctors in training seemed to need this as well as career guidance. For the last 10 years, the trust has appointed a recently retired consultant to provide two programmed activities (PAs) per week as a pastoral lead. They take self-referrals and referrals from the trust’s educational supervisors to meet doctors in training who need an independent, supportive and confidential discussion. This involves career counselling, stress-related performance issues, bullying and harassment, difficult career decisions and personal issues – for example, family illness. The sessions take place within working hours and generally last one to two hours. The guardian of safe working hours can also recommend that doctors in training seek support from the pastoral lead.

The pastoral lead is appointed on the basis they are outside the formal training system, have recently retired and have a lifetime’s experience in the NHS. They receive training and support on careers guidance, coaching and dealing with doctors needing additional support. They provide about 60 consultations a year and signpost doctors in training to support such as coaching, occupational health and careers information and tasters. All consultations are confidential and independent of e-portfolio or training progression, unless the individual suggests significant risk to themselves or patients.

What were the challenges?

The pastoral lead’s role costs the trust the equivalent of two PAs per week, paid for from Health Education South West’s (HESW) educational tariff. The cost was justified by reducing the time educational supervisors had to spend with trainees and the lower referral rate to HESW’s professional support unit.

What were the results?

Despite being the region’s largest trust, UHB has referred the least number of doctors to HESW’s professional support unit. Referral rates from educational supervisors to the pastoral lead reflect increased demand over the past five years, suggesting doctors in training feel the role is valuable and that need is growing. Trainees have independently told the General Medical Council (GMC) that the organisation supports them and provides an excellent environment for learning. The GMC considered the role an excellent innovation during an external review of the hospital in 2016.

Individual feedback suggests trainees remain functional in the workplace with the pastoral lead’s support. There is evidence that a workforce whose wellbeing is supported will contribute to an organisation’s quality of care and efficiency of service. UHB is one of four acute trusts judged excellent in Care Quality Commission ratings.

What were the learning points?

Selecting the correct attributes for the pastoral lead is crucial. These include experience of balancing work and life and significant life events while working in medicine.

Next steps and sustainability

The role has existed for 10 years and the need for it continues, with self-referral and educational supervisor referral rates maintained.

Want to know more?

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