

# Protect this rural cornerstone



Rural GPs play a crucial role in supporting the health and wellbeing of Scotland's rural populations, so why not take the opportunity of this exciting time for Scottish politics to visit a rural GP

surgery and see for yourself the important role they play?

In Scotland, general practice is the cornerstone of the NHS – dealing with 90 per cent of all patient contacts. Patients value general practice very highly, and rank GPs as one of the most trusted of all professions.

But general practice is reaching breaking point. The clear decision of Government and health boards to shift work away from hospitals has created substantial extra work for general practice. The move within hospitals to more specialisation – both of services and sites – often leaves the GP as the only doctor able to take a holistic view of the patient.

In rural Scotland, as in the rest of the UK, an ageing population brings with it the health challenges of long term conditions. Yet income streams for rural GPs – which can include income from practice dispensaries – is shrinking. According to

## References

1. Royal College of General Practitioners. (2014). **Put Patients First.**
2. Scottish Government. (2011). **2020 Vision.**
3. Ballantrae Medical Practice. **Health and Care Experience Survey 2013/14.**

Further information on these references is available from the DDA



The Ballantrae Medical Practice offers high quality general practice in rural Scotland

the Royal College of General Practitioners (RCGP) between 2005-2006 and 2011-2012, the percentage share of the NHS budget spent on general practice across England, Scotland and Wales fell from 10.75% to 8.4% – a historic low.<sup>1</sup>

This is bad news for all patients – but particularly for rural patients – who are most at risk from the possibility of longer waits for hospital appointments, fewer services and access difficulties. It is also bad news for the NHS as a whole – if general practice is not adequately resourced, more patients will end up receiving more expensive hospital care, leading to rapidly escalating healthcare costs.

## What's the solution?

Good access to high quality general practice – particularly in rural areas – is key to the future of the NHS in Scotland at it looks to achieve the challenging agenda set out by the 2020 vision.<sup>2</sup> This seeks to enable “everyone... to live longer healthier... at home, or in a homely setting, and that Scotland will have a healthcare system where there is integrated health and social care and a focus on prevention, anticipation and supported self-management.”

“Dispensing practices are best placed to help achieve the 2020 vision”

It is the view of the Dispensing Doctors' Association that dispensing practices, with their additional dispensary service offering, are the best placed of all GPs to help the NHS in Scotland achieve the aims of the 2020 vision.

With this new era for Scottish politics, there has never been a better time to find out why dispensing GPs are ideally placed

to offer hard to reach and vulnerable communities a comprehensive and cohesive care offering. For more information on what dispensing practices can do for Scotland's NHS, please read on to see the unique role being played by GPs in Ayrshire's Ballantrae Medical Practice.

## How you can help?

With your help dispensing practice can be transformed into a hub for the delivery of integrated health and social services in rural areas. Why not contact the Dispensing Doctors' Association today to arrange a visit to a dispensing GP practice? There, you will see for yourself the vital role these practices play in rural areas.

## What is a Dispensing Doctor?

Dispensing doctors are general practitioners (GPs) who provide primary healthcare to around nine million rural patients. Nearly 3.6 million patients of these live remotely from a community pharmacy.

At the request of the patient, dispensing doctors are allowed to dispense the medicines they prescribe for patients who are considered to have substantial difficulty in obtaining medicines from a pharmacy. This service provides patients with access to medicines and general healthcare under one roof. This includes the operation of branch surgeries and near-patient tests for patients in rural areas.

# Dispensing GPs: Right care - right at the heart of rural communities



The Ballantrae dispensary; helping patients to achieve same-day access to prescribed medicines

**Located in** South Ayrshire, Scotland, at the mouth of the River Stinchar, Ballantrae village is an ideal viewing point for Ailsa Craig, the volcanic island described as the granite jewel of the Firth of Clyde.

Local residents in this former Labour seat are keen to exploit the potential for tourism offered by this natural resource. The hope is that tourism will become a reliable income stream for the area, boosting the local economy and encouraging a net inward migration of younger people. The local GP surgery is aware of its standing as a must-have village amenity, and sees the sustainability of this local and rural NHS service as a practice priority. Local GP Dr Hal Maxwell explains: "Lose the school, the GP and the local post office, and you lose the heart of the village."

But the Ballantrae Medical Practice believes it can go further than achieving just sustainability, and it is proactively fostering a culture of quality improvement. As a dispensing practice, the medicines dispensary provides much-needed additional finance that supports these efforts and over the past five years the Ballantrae practice has been working towards achieving the RCGP's 'Quality Practice Award'. Its efforts have been successful and in April the practice became one of only 300 or so GP surgeries across the UK to have achieved this accolade.

The practice also offers training for medical students – a vital element in ensuring the sustainability of the fragile rural general practice workforce in Scotland – and there are plans to extend the practice's existing immediate care services. These are offered as a vital back up to the rural ambulance service attending accidents or other medical emergencies.

## Service evolution

With the nearest hospitals located 13 miles away and with very poor public transport links, the need is obvious for the Ballantrae practice (and its branch surgery at Barrhill) to continually evolve its offering. From its origins as a single-handed practice, the practice now has three GPs who are supported by a wider clinical and healthcare team comprising practice and community nurses, and attached professionals in dietetics and physiotherapy. There are also two dedicated trained dispensary staff (plus other members of staff undertaking training to support these staff) who work across both practice sites. In 2003, the practice moved into purpose-built premises in Ballantrae (the main surgery) from where the care of 1,500 registered patients is coordinated between the surgeries' hours of 8.40am to 6pm.

Because of patients' remoteness to other healthcare services including a pharmacy, almost all of the surgery's patients receive

the GP dispensary service, supporting the practice's aim to provide same-day access to GP and wider healthcare services (see box below).

The most recent Health and Care Experience Survey for the practice<sup>3</sup> reflects the degree of success it has had in meeting this aim; among the headline results, 100% of the patients polled said they were positive about the arrangements for seeing a doctor and 97% said they were given enough doctor time. Importantly for the dispensary, almost all patients polled (99%) said they found it easy enough to get their medicines, and 98% left the practice knowing what to do if they had problems with their medicines. Given the worrying UK-wide rates for patients not taking their medicines as prescribed, it is also heartening that all patients reported that they were taking their medicines as discussed with the doctor.

Dr Maxwell believes that income from dispensing is crucial in order to support the practice as it develops further to accommodate the changing – and growing – demand for healthcare in Scotland's rural areas. He says: "Dispensing is a significant part of our income. Without it we just wouldn't be able to sustain this practice in its current format."

## Services offered by the Ballantrae Medical Practice

- Antenatal clinic
- Child health clinics
- Minor surgery
- Contraception
- Dietetics
- Podiatry
- Physiotherapy
- Smoking cessation
- Cervical smears

## About the Dispensing Doctors' Association

The Dispensing Doctors' Association (DDA) represents over 6,600 doctors currently working in 1,450 dispensing practices across the UK. It is the only organisation that specifically represents the interests of dispensing doctors and their 8.8 million patients. The DDA meets regularly with ministers and other agencies to promote the contribution dispensing doctors can make to rural health, and achieve fair remuneration and reimbursement for their services. DDA members are always delighted to talk to politicians about the service of rural dispensing, and to host visits to their practices.

If you would like any more information on dispensing, or are yet to visit a constituency practice, please contact the Dispensing Doctors' Association office on: Email: [office@dispensingdoctor.org](mailto:office@dispensingdoctor.org) Tel: 0330 333 6323 Web: [www.dispensingdoctor.org](http://www.dispensingdoctor.org)