

Rural GPs: filling the breach in Wales



Rural GPs are stepping in to fill NHS service 'notspots'

Rural GPs in Wales are stepping in to "fill the breach" left by NHS cost-cutting and service 'notspots', Assembly Members are being told this week. Funding and status for rural general practice should be improved to recognise the vital support these practices offer Wales' rural people.

Around one million people – almost one in three Welsh people – live in rural areas,^{1,2} many of whom are older and are among the most vulnerable in Welsh society. In very rural areas, such patients may access a wide range of healthcare services from their general practice, including a medicine dispensing service, as practices step in to fill the void left by the absence of other healthcare service providers. One such example is the Llanfyllin Group Practice, in Powys, which offers a wide range of clinics and services, saving over 10,000 rural patients from having to make even longer journeys to access similar services elsewhere.³

Rural GPs - envied by urban GPs

GPs working in rural practices say they are the envy of their more urban GP peers.

When they have the funds to do so, such practices are able to employ a wide multidisciplinary team. This ensures that patients receive specialist care from the most suitably qualified health professional. Patients gain the maximum benefit from their care while the NHS investment in that care yields the maximum return.

Importantly, given the current recruitment crisis in general practice in Wales, the presence of a multidisciplinary team means that GPs are free to concentrate on the most complex patients, improving their job satisfaction and workforce retention rates. GPs are also available to step in and fill the voids left by shortfalls in the ranks of other NHS service providers. Last month, Assembly Members were told how GPs are filling the breach caused by the lack of a specialist local workforce. In Powys, the local GPs have covered the specialist elderly care requirement since the long-standing specialist retired. The beds at Bronllys Hospital are being kept open because of the work of local GPs in managing patients in them, Liberal Democrat AM Kirsty Williams

(Brecon and Radnorshire) told the Assembly recently.

The GPs involved in providing extended care services say these opportunities represent a chance to do "the medicine that they were trained to do". Yet, this idyll of general practice is now on the brink of destruction and AMs are urged to do all that they can to strengthen – rather than destabilise – rural general practice.



What AMs can do...

- ✓ Visit a dispensing practice to see the vital role they play in rural communities
- ✓ Talk to patients to understand the value of dispensing practice in rural areas
- ✓ Support funding for rural GP practice that reflects actual service costs

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 Tel: 0330 333 6323 Web: www.dispensingdoctor.org

Rural expertise benefits patients, GPs and the NHS



Dispensing is loved by patients and valued by GPs for the financial support it offers rural GPs' extended case management

“Urban GPs don't understand the range of case management that we do without even thinking about it,” says Llanfyllin group practice GP Dr Melanie Plant.

Based in the Powys village of Llanfyllin, the group practice currently offers a wide range of clinical and dispensing services (see box below) from three fully equipped and full time surgeries. As the nearest Accident and Emergency hospital is in Shrewsbury or Wrexham - each a 30-40 minute drive from the centre of the practice's catchment area - the practice also operates a minor injuries service. Emergency acute care is also not uncommon as patients can wait up to 40 minutes for an ambulance to arrive. At the other end of the spectrum, minor ailments also need to be managed, due to the lack of community pharmacies in the locality.

The group's catchment area covers just under 11,000 patients living in an area of about 600 square miles in size. Llanfyllin, which is the largest of the local villages, has a population of about 1,000, while the other two surgeries, at Four Crosses and Llanrhaeadr, help to cater for the remainder of the practice population, who live across a large scattering of small villages and hamlets. As a result, practice staff can travel 60 miles in visits and any visit can be 40 minutes travelling there and back. (In comparison, in urban environments, all patients will live within three miles of the practice). The practice also has a higher than Welsh average of elderly patients and patients with chronic disease.

Practice patients benefit from a range of practice staff, including eight GPs, one nurse practitioner, five nurses (including two with a minor illness speciality) phlebotomists (as patients cannot easily attend hospital for such services), and a practice pharmacist and a medicines management lead to optimise the pharmaceutical care of the practice's 4,500 repeat medication patients. The practice has also invested in a wide range of equipment to help it manage acutely sick patients, including defibrillators, emergency trollies, multiple ECG machines, and blood pressure monitors. As a result of its investments the practice has created a 'one-stop shop' for care, and as a result has one of the lowest admission rates in Powys and is low for Wales.

Dispensing: supporting service excellence

Llanfyllin group practice receives no allowance for rural inequalities – and in fact, stands to lose a total of £120,000 over seven years, as its Minimum Practice Income Guarantee subsidy payment is withdrawn. It is the practice's income from dispensing that primarily supports the provision of the practice's more specialist services and its extended team of healthcare professionals as well as the branch surgeries.

Dr Plant believes that rural general practice has a lot to offer the disenfranchised NHS GP. She says: “It is a chance to practice real medicine, and for GPs to see more than just the worried well. This model of care keeps GPs interested and patients out of hospital.”

She describes dispensing as not just “an excellent service that patients really value” – but vitally, also as a service that pays for the practice “to do medicine the way it should be done”. Dr Plant says: “Without it, this model of practice will disappear. When we can't afford our pharmacist or practice nurses - that's when the GPs will leave.”

Llanfyllin Group Practice Services

- General Medical Services
- Acute Emergency Care
- Care of patients in Newtown hospital stroke unit and rehabilitation unit in partnership with a neighbouring practice
- Child Health
- Post Natal Care
- Immunisations
- Ante Natal Clinics
- Baby Clinic
- Cervical Cytology
- Chiropody
- Child Health Surveillance
- Counselling
- Family Planning Services-including IUD and Implanon fitting
- Disease management including insulin initiation and management
- District Nurse
- Mental Health-therapist visits weekly
- Minor Surgery Services
- Minor Injury Services
- Pessary Fitting and Replacement
- Smoking Cessation
- Substance Misuse
- Travel Clinics
- Dispensing
- Polypharmacy Review of Medications particularly elderly and post discharge by pharmacist and medicine lead
- Local care home and nursing home enhanced services
- Dental Services
- On site 24-hour ECG, Ambulatory Blood Pressure Monitoring, one hour access to online XRay
- Palliative Care at home with the district nurse team and GPs working with close links to macmillan nurses
- Medical Student and Registrar training - currently exploring nurse training and pre-reg pharmacy training

References

1. Rural/urban definition (England and Wales) <http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/guide-method/geography/products/area-classifications/rural-urban-definition-and-la/rural-urban-definition-england-and-wales-/index.html>
2. Census for Wales 2011. <https://stats.wales.gov.uk/Catalogue/Census/2011>
3. Mid-Wales Healthcare Study. <http://wihs.c.southwales.ac.uk/midwaleshealthstudy>