

Case Study: Swan Medical Centre, Birmingham

GP Assistant

Sonia Rai had been at the practice for 14 years. She had been working in the administrative team and moved into a reception role but felt that the time was right for a change. This was partly due to personal circumstances; her children had reached school age, and with childcare less of a challenge, she felt they would be ready to dedicate the time to the opportunity. She was enthusiastic about the chance for personal growth.

Her experience of communicating with Nottinghamshire Alliance Training Hub (NATH) was very positive, and she felt that David Peachey had communicated well with them throughout. Her experience in the practice was more mixed. Both mentors were excellent, although the first had gone on long term leave and a new mentor had to be found. Sonia had, however, found that they were “very dependent on the whole practice” for support and training, and some people had not been as supportive with their time. There had been points where it had been very difficult to get people to train her in the practical aspects of the course, and she had been “ready to give up” until an ANP had taken them under their wing. She doesn’t feel that they would have kept going without that support. The realisation that they were so dependent on others had caused them anxiety at the beginning of the course, as well as having “insecurities” about their own abilities. During the course, it had been hard to get people to support practical training in particular. For example, she had completed her phlebotomy course but could not get the HCA to let her practice, as it took longer than doing it themselves. As time went on, she lost confidence, and it took the ANP’s support to get them practical support and practice.

The peer-to-peer support in WhatsApp had been very positive too, but the observation that you are reliant on the whole practice was common to many people, and some had “moved on” as a result of not getting enough help from the rest of the team, even when mentors had been helpful.

Sonia’s experience of the portal was that it was not intuitive and could be hard to use, and that her first mentor had struggled too. The support from SYSCO had been very helpful, as had the drop ins that NATH provided.

She had had to do “bits and bobs” in her own time in evenings and weekends, because although she did have protected time, the “day job” leaked into the learning time.

Despite the problems, Sonia felt that she was very lucky. She is very proud of having learned new skills and tried something different, and feel that their spouse is proud of them too. It had been important to her to get extra training and as she had previously been more comfortable sticking to what she knew, it was really personally important to have completed the course.

She is currently running two clinics providing phlebotomy, blood pressure and ECG tests and other health checks. She is keen to take on additional courses, including in vaccination and smoking cessation. These have helped the practice by allowing her to see more patients in these clinics, freeing up time for other tasks, and patients have been seen faster. For now, Sonia is happy to stay in her current role, building their skills and experience. But with the confidence she has gained, she says that “you never know where this might lead.”

In terms of if she would change anything, she asked for more support with the portal. On balance, she is happy they persevered and found the course a “brilliant opportunity to grow.”

Sonia Rai received a small pay rise on completing the course; she did not ask for this, but it was offered by the practice. This is a positive outcome too.

GP Practice

The practice is a teaching practice, and has a well-established record of training a wide range of professionals, at various stages of their careers, from HCAs through to medical students and GP registrars. The GP Mentor interviewed for this case study is a very experienced mentor, with a passion for training and 10 years in the mentorship role. They were not involved in the initial stages of mentorship; another GP had been mentoring, but was on long term leave and Dr Ubogu took over. Dr Ubogu felt that the support he received was excellent, and that he had been impressed by how comprehensive the course was and how good the information they received was.

The practice introduced the role in the hope that it would reduce GP over-work, especially in terms of the administrative burden. The GPA role, which provided aspects of a Personal Assistant and of an HCA, “felt like a no-brainer”.

The role is continuing to develop, on both the administrative and the clinical sides. Sonia Rai has reduced the amount of time that Dr Ubogu has to spend on forms, saving 20-30 minutes per form in some cases, and this has helped him to spend more time with patients. Dr Ubogu and Sonia Rai liaise closely and have a really positive working relationship. They are also developing the HCA side of the role, with Sonia taking on two clinics, and learning skills in wound assessment and smoking cessation alongside her GPA roles. Dr Ubogu feels that with the right support and help with funding, there are “no limits” to primary care and there is a very wide range of tasks the GPA could help with. He is very positive about the individual GPA candidate’s enthusiasm and willingness to learn, which made the whole experience very positive.

At the moment, the practice does not employ a separate HCA, and have brought in a new administrator to backfill some basic administration time to free Sonia up to use her skills. Dr Ubogu feels it is hard to quantify the benefits of the role in cost terms; it has reduced the need to employ a phlebotomist and freed time to care but he did not think it was possible to put a financial value on these benefits.

Dr Ubogu talked about the enthusiasm and commitment of Sonia in very positive terms.

The pandemic had made it harder to have practical training and face to face support. Dr Ubogu suggested that now that restrictions had ended, it would be useful to run practical sessions or away days, both in terms of teaching skills in a memorable way and in terms of helping the GPA candidates make friends and professional connections.

For the present, the role is still being developed and the practice is working through the most useful way to use Sonia’s skills. Dr Ubogu would recommend taking part in the programme to a colleague and would be happy to train another GPA if the situation arose in the future.