

# Doctor, doctor

Development is key to helping leaders navigate the pressurised world of NHS primary care

Writing Gerry Devine

**A**t one time or another, we have all been cared for at a GP surgery. But who supports the people who ensure these vital services keep their doors open each day? Primary care leaders face many challenges when delivering healthcare services, with a particular challenge being the ever-shifting nature of the NHS landscape.

The world of primary care is highly pressurised. There are numerous targets to meet and compliance standards to maintain. On top of that, leaders must wrestle with the NHS's infamous reams of jargon while finding sufficient time for the important job of guiding, motivating and supporting their teams.

GP practices in England are regulated by the Care Quality Commission (CQC), which regularly inspects and rates them against five key questions applied to all health service providers. One of these five questions is: "Are they well-led?" This question requires practice managers to evidence how they ensure the delivery of high-quality care, encourage learning and innovation, and promote a fair and open culture within their practices.

The CQC uses its inspections to rate GP practices on a scale ranging from inadequate to outstanding. The public can then refer to the ratings to help them choose where they receive their care. As a result, it's critical for managers in primary care to build and develop their leadership skills so they can ensure their practices are the best they can be.

NHS England has also set out ambitions to improve leadership capabilities within general practice through the GP Forward View, a five-year plan for primary care published in 2016. It plans to "build change leadership capabilities in practices and federations, enabling providers to improve quality".

## **Providing the skills and knowledge to boost leaders' careers**

To help leaders and managers in primary care meet, and exceed, the standards and targets set for them, the team at primary care training provider Thornfields set about creating bespoke courses that are tailored especially to their needs. We took care to draw upon the real, day-to-day experiences they face in their roles, with the aim of making the courses as practical as possible.

As a result, we now offer an ILM Level 3 Award in Leadership & Managing People with Confidence, and an ILM Level 5 Award in Leadership & Management, which are run over five months. In addition, we offer the ILM Level 5 Certificate in Primary Healthcare Management, which is taken over nine months.

Each course incorporates five full-day sessions of face-to-face learning time and one-on-one time with the course trainer. The timeframes are built around the busy working lives of practice managers. Many of our staff and trainers are current or former practice managers themselves, and the business has been working hand in hand with NHS organisations across the UK for 25 years.

When we mapped out the main objectives for our courses, we placed a strong focus on helping delegates to enhance their leadership capabilities through effective communication, relationship building and motivating their practice teams.

Primary care leaders at various stages in their careers need to develop these key skills to comply with regulation. So we set out to accommodate a range of experience levels when developing our courses. Our entry-level award is aimed at building the skills and confidence of new GP practice managers, team leaders and supervisors. It covers topics such as communication skills and managing conflict through close examination of case studies, workshops and one-on-one trainer tutorials.

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At the other end of the spectrum, our advanced courses have been tailored to meet the needs of experienced practice managers, business partners and assistant practice managers. They have more of a strategic focus, tackling subjects such as innovation and change, delegation and coaching skills.

By placing a strong focus on interactive, hands-on learning, all of our full-day training sessions include plenty of discussion and group activities to encourage the sharing of practical knowledge and experience. We used the Institute of Leadership & Management's training materials in the development of our courses and we always recommend that delegates make use of its invaluable reading lists. One of our team's key aims is to ensure the ILM courses relate directly to GP practice management – something that is made possible because many members of our team have experience working in those very roles.

### A participant's perspective

GP practice manager Susan Lowe had a 35-year career in clinical and managerial roles in secondary care, before becoming a GP practice manager in 2014. Having worked as an operational manager in a number of large, complex teaching hospitals, she found adapting to primary care a real challenge. Lowe decided to register for our ILM Level 3 course, Managing People with Confidence, to study up-to-date management tools and techniques and help rebuild her confidence.

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started to doubt my ability to take them through some of the challenges we were facing," she says. "This was due to the variation in work ethics, understanding of teamwork, the overall need to change, and how their roles contributed to us achieving this change."

Lowe explains how the course helped her to become a better leader: "I have completely changed our appraisal process to support the delivery of organisational objectives. I have also learned techniques to solve complaints and office conflicts in a more timely way. Now, I can spot people's strengths and weaknesses more easily and I know how to develop them to enhance the team's performance."

Our trainers aim to provide delegates with much more than a certificate for their portfolio. Seeing how delegates' self-belief has been boosted is a real point of pride for our team, especially when we see assistant managers gain the confidence to take the next steps in their careers.

Providing development to primary care leaders translates into direct benefits for the public. It equips them to deal with the everyday pressures of increased levels of patient demand and an ageing population. By applying the skills they have learned on their courses to improve communication, refine processes and enhance workplace performance, managers and leaders can create a safer environment for the people they care for. **E**

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