

Friends in the know

CARRIE SERVICE meets practice manager and chair of the West Sussex Practice Managers' Association, JO WADEY, to talk about how the role has evolved and how staff and patients are the driving force behind improvements at her practice



Jo Wadey, practice manager at St Lawrence Surgery in Worthing, has been in the NHS for over 25 years, having originally trained as a medical secretary. She has worked in secondary care and at a PCT and joined the St Lawrence Surgery six-and-a-half years ago. As a member of the National Practice Manager Network and chair of the West Sussex Practice Managers' Association (WSPMA), Wadey knows better than anyone the importance of having a good network of like-minded practice managers to turn to for support. The WSPMA has proven popular in the area, with around

90 members to date, and has been given £15,000 from the PCT to fund its seminars and workshops. The association has recently launched an induction programme providing training and support for PMs who are new to the role. So far it has been well received. "Last week was the first one and the evaluations were brilliant," Wadey says, "because people come into this role and they need to learn so much." With the NHS now demanding more and more expertise around the business side of running a practice, a great many are taking on people with backgrounds in business and finance – but with little knowledge of the NHS.



Wadey believes that training and induction programmes are vital in filling this gap to better prepare the new breed of practice manager for the job: "The role has always been evolving but I think in this last year or two significantly – and CQC registration as well has caused practices a lot of anxiety and extra workload. With that and clinical commissioning, there are lots of practice managers getting more stressed."

Valuable input

With the NHS in turbulent times and primary care bearing the brunt, Wadey stresses the importance of keeping staff

in the loop and ensuring they feel valued. With this in mind, she uses staff appraisals as an opportunity for people to put forward their ideas for improvement at the surgery – after all, they know better than anyone how small changes can make a big difference: "We write a business plan every year based on several elements. The partnership and I sit down to discuss the annual patient survey results, what the financial situation is and what our staff feel about the practice and the way forward. For example how we can continue to strive for excellence, and create efficiencies within the practice. The staff and patients come up with some really

good ideas." The practice has six-monthly meetings where every member of staff is present so that any issues can be raised. One simple management tool that has proven popular with the staff at St Lawrence is the '90-second update' email that Wadey sends out to all staff every morning. This is a short, to-the-point bulletin email that gives a quick run-down of what is happening that day – for example, if there is a locum doctor coming in; if any visitors are expected and the number of appointments for the day. This keeps everybody informed and takes next to no time to complete each morning. >

Patient power

The surgery has a strong relationship with its patients and a very proactive patient participation group – Friends of St Lawrence – which organises numerous events for patients. At a recent community event organised by the group, one patient was overheard comparing the surgery to a community centre. On a tour of the practice, it's easy to see why they felt that way. Student artwork and a colourful beach-hut play area brighten up the waiting room and the 'education room' – a spacious meeting room with its own kitchen, interactive whiteboard and separate access and toilet facilities – means the surgery can host a range of activities, including a Tai Chi class; a recently-launched walking group; and, at some point in the near future, a singing group.

Call for action

So how can other PMs, inspired by the work of the Friends of St Lawrence, improve their own patient participation? Wadey suggests email as a good way of keeping in touch with busy patients and also those who can't always come into the surgery. "We've got NHS.net distribution for our patients and we have a virtual patient reference group as well as a participation group," she explains. "We've had someone with bipolar [disorder] on there, someone with agoraphobia, someone who has to care for someone with mental health [and] dementia problems. So people who can't get down to the surgery and come to meetings – or don't feel comfortable to do it – are still able to give their opinions from home." To really benefit from a patient email database, Wadey advises that practices delegate a member of staff to be responsible for maintaining it, so that it is always accurate and up to date.

If you're trying to boost your PPG numbers, getting clinical staff to push the agenda is an effective way of convincing patients to get involved. "Get a GP or a nurse or a health visitor to actually ask someone personally – if you just put notices up and send letters out it's not as personal as a doctor saying: 'Do you know what, I think you'd be really good in our group,'" says Wadey. Having a clinician explain to the patient that the group isn't just about fundraising and is a vital part of improving services could also improve uptake. "The GPs really have to be on board – and the practice nurses," she adds. "When we have our PPG meetings I always go, but I always

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get a GP to come too. It's only an hour and a half in the evening and the patients feel that they are being really appreciated and valued.”

A self-care mission

Wadey's next project is to encourage patients to manage their own health to reduce unnecessary appointments. "I'm on the locality for Worthing and I've been looking more at the Self Care Forum, how patients can access healthcare professionals most appropriately," she tells me. Part of this drive involves teaching clinicians how to empower their patients by giving them sufficient information about their ailments. "Often GPs will say: 'Oh yes it's a chest infection, I won't give you any antibiotics but if it gets worse come back and see me,'" explains Wadey. "But what they don't say is it could last for three weeks and antibiotics might not make any difference. We don't always tell or give patients enough information to empower them to self-care – so of course patients often come back." Wadey hopes a new onsite pharmacy will help the initiative and has been working with the pharmacist to improve patients' management of minor ailments. The pharmacy is open from 8am to 6.30pm, mirroring the surgery's hours, and also features a machine for patients to take their own blood pressure (there are also a number of these located around the surgery itself). If Wadey and her team can get patients and GPs to take note, she believes it could have a real impact on the future of healthcare in the area: "The Self Care Forum has said that 20% of patients go to GPs for minor ailments – the top ones being back pain, sore throats, chest infections, eczema, that sort of thing – when actually they can look after themselves at home. We think if we can try to manage the demand in Worthing it will help the ever-increasing demands on GP practices and hopefully this will have a knock-on effect and reduce the number of A&E attendances – and maybe even emergency admissions." ■



fast facts

Practice St Lawrence Surgery, Worthing
Manager Jo Wadey
Time in role Six and a half years
Number of patients 13,500
Number of GPs 10