Lessons in leadership

Student-led clinics provide a quality placement for future professionals, and support capacity by reducing waiting lists and increasing patient safety and satisfaction.

As a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, NHS trusts have had to adapt and work differently, prioritising essential and high-risk patients. This has often resulted in a significant delay or temporary stop to foot care treatments, foot protection, musculoskeletal (MSK) podiatry, health coaching and patient education. Alongside this, the Interim NHS People Plan (NHS, 2019) had already indicated an urgent need to address significant workforce shortages across the whole health sector. With an ageing workforce (Nicol, 2017), it has become imperative that we recognise the need for support and work to secure our future workforce.

Universities continue to increase healthcare placements on courses, and every additional place at university comes with the requirement of additional clinical hours in practice. Where capacity is already a concern, the additional pressure of providing quality placements for podiatry learners, and increasing the number of placements in total has seemed, at times, an impossible task.

The student-led clinic project spearheads a positive culture change within practice regarding how we view learners and what approach we take in managing their valuable placements. The students are no longer viewed as an additional pressure on practice, but have become a valuable resource in tackling patient waiting lists, increasing patient safety and improving satisfaction. As a consequence, this has supported the wellbeing of existing staff by relieving workloads.

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The model

NHS England's Learning Environments Assessment and Placements (LEAP) programme has operated alongside Leeds Community Podiatry Services and the University of Huddersfield since August 2022 to run student-led podiatry clinics. The first of 10 clinical sessions was piloted in January 2023. The model was designed for six second-year students to work in pairs across three clinic rooms,

RESOURCE

- For those in private practice who would like to support podiatry students, free e-learning for educators can be found at **bit.ly/elearning-PEAP**

LAURA SINGLETON is a clinical leadership fellow at NHS England and a specialist podiatrist at Leeds Community Healthcare NHS Trust

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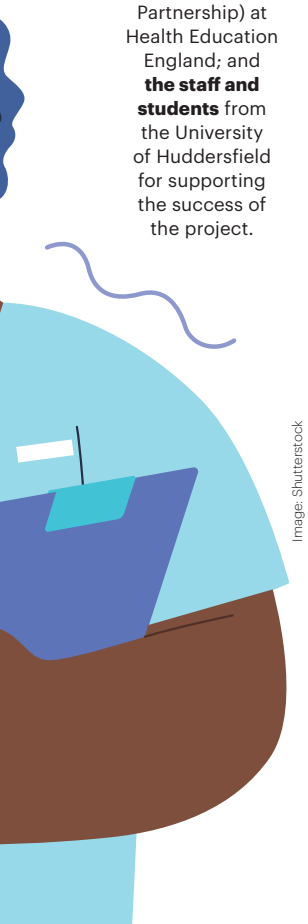

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with one registered podiatrist to support and sign off each patient consultation. This significantly increases the number of patients that one registered podiatrist can see. The model can easily be adapted to target whichever area of practice needs the most support. In the pilot, the areas were heel pain clinics and clinics to re-assess 'at-risk' patients.

Because the students work together in pairs, the need for the registered practitioner to step in during the consultation is reduced. When securing space was difficult, the clinics were run over two rooms with an extended working day. The students' start times, finish times and lunch breaks were staggered to provide constant cover.

A thorough assessment was undertaken of each patient along with patient education, which included advice on nail-cutting techniques, safe positions for applying emollient and recommendations on appropriate footwear. This was accompanied by a management plan, agreed upon by each patient and the student. All of these were signed off by the registered podiatrist before the patient's consultation concluded.

Patient evaluation

Feedback from patients has been exceptional. Patients have reported feeling engaged and empowered with the new skills they have learned. This, coupled with the ongoing support of the service, aims to reduce the risk of future lower-limb deterioration. Patients reported feeling relieved and confident that they will be able to continue to go to work, lowering sickness absence levels by following the set management plans provided. They also said that they 'felt acknowledged' and 'listened to', and were pleased to have been able to support the learners on their educational journey. More than 80 patients were assessed and reviewed; out of 54 completed evaluation forms, 100% of these patients reported they would be happy to continue attending student-led clinics in the future.

'The student-led clinic project represents an innovative way forward'

How to set up a placement

- Find your nearest university offering a podiatry course to make contact with their placements team: **bit.ly/UCAS-podiatry**
- Each university may do things slightly differently, but after discussing what you could offer a podiatry learner, an audit is likely to take place. This will be carried out by a university assessor.
- You could see your first podiatry student placement begin four to five months later, depending on university placement dates.

Student evaluation

Another sign of the project's success is the impact it has had on the quality of placements. Students reported feeling valued and part of a team, and that both their clinical skills and confidence have significantly grown. Their communication with patients – in particular, in the way they adapt their communication style to suit each patient's needs – was impressive to observe. By the final student-led clinic day, the students' communication styles were all exemplary; communication is often reported as being a difficult area of development for newly qualified podiatrists, so this is a significant step within the learning process. The learners showed a high standard of professionalism and engagement, which is supported by patient feedback. Over the course of the pilot, they developed leadership skills that will help strengthen their ability to progress in their future careers. Of the six student podiatrists who took part in the student-led clinics pilot, 100% said they would consider a future career with their current placement provider.

Outcomes for practice

Supporting health inequalities has become a significant factor within this project, especially for patients who were previously unable to access services for a new patient assessment or review/reassessment. When heightened levels of risk or deterioration were identified during reassessment clinics, patients were given the knowledge and tools to continue to mitigate those risks going forward.

While podiatry vacancies continue to grow nationally, the long-term recruitment opportunity for practice is incredible: building important relationships through investing in our future professionals is a successful long-term recruitment strategy.

With this initiative, waiting lists can continue to be reduced by student-led clinics. Pressure will then reduce on existing staff members, supporting their wellbeing. Importantly, this model provides an opportunity for registered podiatrists to develop leadership skills and support podiatry learners, which we have shown increases motivation, engagement and achievement for both the students and the podiatry teams.

Recommendations

Although we have already seen a significant impact within the NHS, this model could also work equally well in the private sector, especially in areas where private practices have stepped in to support long-term podiatry patients who have been unable to access NHS services.

At a time when it has never been more imperative to find different ways to appreciate the value of our learner placements, the student-led clinic project represents a significant and innovative way forward.