

The Consultant Contract: Supporting Professional Activities (SPAs)

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What are SPAs?

Consultants have always been leaders in developing and improving the delivery of patient care.

Since 2004, a clear and specific amount of time has been allocated in consultants' job plans to recognise this work, which is called "Supporting Professional Activities" (SPAs). SPAs are at the heart of what it means to be a consultant and exemplify the added value that consultants bring to the NHS. It is during the time made available through SPAs that consultants are able to improve and hone their skills through auditing their practice, researching, innovating, developing new techniques and building new services. Such activities are essential to the long term maintenance and improvement of the quality of the service provided to patients but do not represent direct, hands-on patient care.

The consultant contract sets out the standard number of supporting professional activities, 2.5 per week on average or 10 hours (paragraph 4.2.2), that should be made available to a full time consultant, with variation from this standard split being subject to agreement between the employer and the individual consultant.

Supporting professional activities (SPAs) form a key part of the job plan and the BMA strongly believes that it is essential to patients, the service and consultants themselves that SPA levels are maintained appropriately.



What do Consultants do in their SPA time?

Health services develop and undergo continual improvement through the efforts of consultants: by their professional commitment to remaining in lifelong education, by continuing to innovate and by taking the initiative to develop and introduce new services, thereby improving the quality of the service to patients.

Supporting professional activities include:

- Continuing professional development (CPD)
- Teaching and training
- Management of doctors in training
- Audit
- Job planning
- Appraisal
- Revalidation
- Research
- Contribution to service management and planning
- Clinical governance activities

Real life examples of how SPAs benefit patient care and service quality

We asked consultants to give us real examples of how they use their SPA time. Their answers highlight how vital SPA time is to ensure the best quality care for patients:

Consultant, Dr Stephen Curran, used his SPA time to set up a community-based eating disorder service for his health board. In addition he was able to contribute to the setting up of a regional in-patient unit for eating disorders and participate in the NHS Quality Improvement Scotland (NHS QIS) committee which adapted the NICE guidelines on eating disorders for Scotland. He has also been able to set up an adult ADHD clinic and participate in the new Scottish adult ADHD special interest group, which seeks to raise awareness of this condition in adults, improve services and co-ordinate and facilitate research into this disorder.

“SPA time is vital – it allows us to develop the service and ourselves in ways that may not produce immediately tangible results for individual patients but lead to vast improvement in the service in the long run.”

Graham Tydeman, Consultant in Obstetrics and Gynaecology, NHS Fife

Dr Tydeman designed and implemented one of the first fully integrated video archive, telemetry and electronic reporting and audit packages in fetal medicine – which is now used in over 30 units in the UK. He has set up one of the few congenital anomaly registers in Scotland. He has also invented a variety of new medical devices and teaching aids both solo and in collaboration with St Thomas (one was shortlisted for NHS London, Innovator Award) covering a range of topics from improving the detection of congenital heart disease to aid the delivery of an impacted fetal head at caesarean section. In addition he is on a variety of committees and groups within Scotland and the UK.



"When I started, this department was demoralised; low on skills, long waiting times, low patient turnover, crumbly clinic, dissatisfied clients. In two years and at no extra cost I led my team to turn this into a thriving department that won a Fife Partnership Excellence Award in 2006.

"If I had not the time to do this, the department would have sunk into oblivion – affecting sexual & HIV healthcare needs for the whole of Fife. Today the situation is completely different, with the service reaching into every corner of Fife with good accessibility and acceptability by clients. Every Scottish and UK audit has shown us to be achieving well. We put forward our case and were able to move into new premises and are currently working towards an integrated service with family planning, psychology, ID etc. The time and effort that I was allowed as a single handed consultant to invest has reaped much more in terms of patient benefit and our professional satisfaction.

"Straight-jacketing a consultant into a reduced SPA job plan will have a detrimental effect on service modernisation and delivery."

Indranil Banerjee, Consultant Physician, Department of Genitourinary Medicine, NHS Fife

Alastair Murray, Consultant Orthopaedic Surgeon at the Royal Hospital for Sick Children in Edinburgh was able to create a new service for treating clubfoot in South East Scotland. He also developed several departmental databases to audit activity and outcome of common procedures to ensure quality of care. He has used his SPA time to set up and deliver a core skills course in orthopaedics for early years' orthopaedics trainees, a new screening programme for hip dysplasia in West Lothian and a new childrens' orthopaedic clinic in West Lothian.

In addition, SPA time allows him to comply with the national audit requirements of key pathologies and activity and to maintain a logbook of operations which can be used to inform patients of his experience. He also spends SPA time attending committee meetings, such as those to plan and deliver a new childrens' hospital, in his role as a Regional Surgical Advisor for the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh (RCSEd), which delivers support to trainees and consultants in CPD, and as a member of the Scottish Collegiate Committee for Children's Surgical Services.

SPAs also provide the opportunity to undertake essential research. Mr Murray has conducted research into hip dysplasia in children with work aimed at identifying a marker for this condition to improve screening. He has also undertaken research into Perthes disease of the hip.



"In my SPA time I have instigated and developed a multi-disciplinary nutrition team in the hospital, have taken the role of lead clinician for nutrition, attended Food, Fluid and Nutrition Steering group meetings and helped to prepare for the QIS visit to examine the QIS Standards for nutrition.

"I have also been principal investigator in our intensive care unit for the SIGNET trial, a large multicentre trial involving parenteral nutrition in critical care patients. This trial is likely to have significant implications for the use of glutamine in ICUs throughout the world.

"I am currently principal investigator for two government-sponsored studies on patients with swine flu, SwIFT and GenISIS. I have helped to run ten audits with trainees which have been used to institute improvements to practice in the intensive care unit.

"Also as part of my SPA time I have taken over as Intensive Care Medicine Tutor and have made many developments to the educational programme in the ICU, including an improved induction, recruitment of three educational supervisors, a system of feedback from trainees at the end of their attachment, x-ray meetings and a programme of tutorials and trainee presentations. I now run the rota for the trainees and am a member of the Scottish Intensive Care Society's Education and Training group."

Marcia McDougall, Intensive Care and Anaesthetic Consultant, Queen Margaret Hospital, Dunfermline

In addition to the activities described above, consultants are expected to ensure that their skills and knowledge are up to date in order to ensure patient safety and to deliver a quality service to patients. Continuing professional development (CPD) is an essential component of SPA time, as is preparation for revalidation and appraisal, which all doctors must undertake. The role of a consultant also involves teaching and training of junior doctors and medical students, and again time during SPAs is used for this purpose.

"I believe that the activity we engage in during SPA time benefits the organisation and patients. It is very difficult to fit this in, even to 2.5 sessions. I believe that by limiting SPA time, it will be expected that more of this work will be done in unlimited overtime without remuneration. Recently appointed consultants will not be prepared to do this, as they are used to time based contracts, and as a consequence, the service will suffer."

Dr Sheena Pinion, Consultant in Obstetrics and Gynaecology, NHS Fife.

Summary

Consultants are essential components of delivering quality patient care - leading teams, developing services and sharing expertise. They are dedicated to the fundamental principles of the NHS and lead teams of healthcare workers effectively and efficiently, adding value to patient care.

SPAs are not an allowance for the comfort of consultants, nor are they time away from the wards at the expense of patient care. Rather they are vital in allowing consultants the time and space to develop their skills, train junior staff and maintain and improve services and techniques which directly benefit patient care and safety.