General practice in Northern Ireland: The case for change
Case studies
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Introduction

It is clear in Northern Ireland that we have reached the point of no return for general practice.

Multiple drivers that have precipitated the current crisis include an ageing population, particularly those over 85, increases in obesity and long term chronic illnesses, the reality of economic constraints and workforce challenges.

The following case studies highlight some of the issues currently facing general practice.

The reality – GPs are quitting due to bureaucracy
A young male GP partner has decided to leave general practice, because of reduced job satisfaction. Although the volume of consultations has risen, it was the increasing paperwork and bureaucracy which has been the final straw. A surgery full of patients became the easy part of the day, rather than the most challenging. This has made sessional work in the emergency department of his local hospital a more attractive option for him.

The reality – GPs are quitting due to workload
A female GP trainer with 20 years’ experience in practice has opted to leave her partnership to work in the medico-legal sector. Her words are telling – “I’m so sad to leave general practice, but I won’t have to explain to anyone doing this job why I’m leaving it. I’m really looking forward to a life!”

The reality – young GPs are leaving Northern Ireland
A young married couple, both of whom are doctors. One is a locum; the other a partner. In the practice, another partner retired and a replacement cannot be found. Due to the unsustainable pressure on the practice and their relationship, they decided to up sticks and emigrate to Australia with no intention of returning, not least due to the better work life balance on offer there.

The reality – women are juggling work with other responsibilities
A female GP, mother to two young children, is finding general practice to be hostile to her family life. Working from 8am – 8pm and having to cover GP out of hours service, she is finding it increasingly difficult to juggle work and home, often not seeing her children as they are in bed by the time she gets home. On occasion, she has had to ask her husband to bring the children to the practice at lunchtime.

The reality – retirements are impacting on practices
A practice has three GP partners who are all in their mid-fifties. Due to increasing workload year on year, all three GPs are now considering retiring within the next three years. They are finding it almost impossible to retain a younger partner. The current younger partner in the practice is the 4th in a short space of time, the previous three incumbents having left due to workload and lack of work/life balance.

The reality – buildings are inadequate
A Trust owned premise has for years struggled with an inadequate building. According to one of the partners, “After 16 years I have a wipe clean floor, a coat of magnolia paint and a sink I can wash my hands in. No maintenance nor upkeep to the building despite facelift and still no room to swing a cat. No disabled access to rooms. This is what we should have had as a bare minimum 20 years ago.”
Federations of GP practices

The BMA Northern Ireland General Practitioner Committee believes that Federations of practices will help counter pressures currently facing family doctors.

Federations could potentially:
– increase the range and type of services in the community
– improve access to diagnostics
– provide extended hours
– Support GP out of hours services

This will help to reduce demands on hospitals and free up GP practice time. This will, in turn, increase the number of GP appointments available and provide longer appointments for those patients with complex health and social care needs and long term chronic illness.

A federated approach – rheumatology
The East Belfast GP Federation will contract with the Belfast Trust to upskill GP providers to see 50% of the rheumatology referrals in their area. This will reduce the demand for hospital rheumatology clinics to the level of the Trust’s capacity.

A federated approach – pharmacy
The Derry GP Federation will employ practice based pharmacists who will assist practices with the management of prescriptions (120,000 per average practice per year). This will free up approximately six hours of GP time per day for the practice, which can be used for patient appointments.

A federated approach – phlebotomy
A number of Federations are considering providing a phlebotomy (blood testing) service in their area for practices thus freeing up treatment room time so that practice nurses can take on more complex roles in the community.