

Awareness of the Presence and Role of Physician Associates in the Irish Healthcare System

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To the Editor,

Since the graduation of the first Physician Associates (PA) from the Royal College of Surgeons Ireland in 2018, PAs are integrating into the Irish Health System. The majority are currently employed in surgical specialities. Our Department of Colorectal Surgery has recently employed the first Physician Associate in the South East of Ireland. We aimed to determine the level of knowledge surrounding the role of PAs in our local surgical community. We created a brief, anonymous five question survey which was distributed at Surgical Grand Rounds at University Hospital Waterford (UHW).

A total of 35 responses were obtained (25=NCHDs/Consultants, 9=Students, 1=Not Provided). 40% (n=14) correctly identified that PA stands for Physician Associate. 37.1% (n=13) correctly answered that PAs complete six years of post-secondary education. Of these, 2 appropriately specified the two years Masters nature of the qualification. Only two respondents correctly stated that there are between 20-30 PAs working in Ireland. 45.7% (n=16) identified the correct number of PAs currently working at UHW. Our last question was open ended and asked, 'What is the role of the PA?'. The majority (80%) of respondents correctly identified the role of the PA to include ward-based patient care. Seven specifically mentioned prescribing, however two incorrectly answered that PAs can prescribe.

Our results show that the majority of surgeons & surgical trainees are aware of the basic role of the PA. Knowledge of the finer details of the professional responsibilities of PAs are lacking. We have identified the need for increased awareness of the presence and specific roles of the PA in the Irish surgical community.

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