Introduction

Debate surrounding the length of training for general practitioners is long established. A view is often taken that three years is insufficient to assimilate the knowledge and is too brief to be regarded as a GP, and newly qualified GPs lack ‘readiness’ to practice. Research has also shown that recently qualified GPs have quite different career expectations compared to their more senior colleagues. Prior to embarking on a career pathway or getting practical, doctors are seeking to broaden their experience in, and exposure to, primary care. This has been evidenced in feedback at the end of training and national surveys into career expectations and choices. The evidence suggests that current learning needs remain on completion of traditional training programmes, and these are highlighted by a lack of focus on opportunities for personal and professional development.

Objective

The Wessex Extension Programme was developed to allow newly qualified GPs 3-6 months of protected, extended experience in general practice. The scheme aimed to promote extensions, most notably by integrating and focusing longitudinal care in both training and non-training practices, and included a whole day of education each week. Twenty-six newly-qualified GPs were taken from practice across Wessex.

Description of the scheme

- 2 days in a training practice
- 2 days in a non-training practice
- 1 day of bespoke education in an action learning set

All participants chose to use their GP registrar year training practice as one of their practices. The inclusion of two days in a non-training practice was intended to allow a taste of working in a non-training environment, a novel development, which set the scheme apart from other extensions programmes.

The education day ran as an action learning set, focusing on the needs of young GPs seeking employment and the professional skills required for a career.

Evaluation methodology

A qualitative, mixed-method evaluation of the experiences of the participants was undertaken.

The research questions addressed by the evaluation were:

- What are the perceptions of the newly qualified GP about their learning and development needs?
- What themes emerge from the expressions of the scheme and what are they?
- Why is this important for newly qualified GPs?

Method

The data for the study were gathered from the GP REG parties on the training and non-training practices, and the newly qualified GPs. Pre-scheme data were collected on learning needs and views of the education programme, and each learning day was evaluated on the day. Post-scheme data were collected using questionnaires, confidence scales, reflective accounts and focus groups.

Data analysis

The data was analyzed for themes and were contextualized against the research questions for the evaluation and order literature. Further statistical analysis of aspects of the data is anticipated.

Results

Of the twenty-six newly qualified GPs recruited, nineteen went on to complete the scheme. Those who withdrew did so because they either secured a GP partnership, started post or took a career break.

The main themes arising from the data included:

- Increased self-confidence
- A refocusing of learning needs from clinical to professional skills
- A broader experience of the ‘real world’ of general practice obtained from working in a non-training practice

The newly qualified GPs reported that they were motivated more than previously in their practices. They felt like ‘proper doctors.’ Pre-scheme data being set aside for formal contact ‘either before the open day’ support was given in an informal and ad hoc way, such as at coffee time or during quiet surgeries. Extensive discussion cases tended to centre-on-interesting or difficult cases and CPD.

Participants reported that they found the experience worthwhile, relevant and timely for their future careers. As a result, all felt more confident in their abilities.

‘I think when I first... when we were first talking about filling out the application forms, I very much thought it was clinical - I need to know about endocrinology and this, this and this... Actually I think what we have covered on the study days has been more useful than that but I just didn’t know it at that stage.’

‘I think if I had done this in my registrar year I don’t think I would have benefited so much because I wouldn’t have been as aware of the issues as I am now. Whereas now it is the perfect timing. They are things that we are all now finding out about and understanding more, whereas in my registrar year I needed to know more about clinical skills.’

‘I felt in control and was amazed at the change in confidence compared with the early GP registrar days. I no longer felt I was doing duty with my trainer. Having a proper job immediately would not have provided the support that was so essential.’

The practice-led emphasis of the scheme, supported by the learning set, facilitated the participants’ awareness of their unknown, non-clinical learning needs.

‘We were on a course last year which was structured in a way that is similar to what we are having and I think it is very different... because that was a knowledge-based approach. Now we are dealing with practical things. Now we are treated more as colleagues and we are dealing with the practical aspects that as newly qualified GPs we have difficulties with. Rather than just clinical things, it’s about how we deal with people, how we work with our colleagues.’

‘I think it is really good to give you a breathing space. The registrar year is so full of getting everything done and working towards your exam that there is not really time to think about what you are doing. So this course has been really useful to give you a little bit of focus on all the other things - jobs/careers/where you’re going. This course gives you a little bit of time to get used to becoming independent but still have the familiarity of your training practice.’

‘...the programme has been really good, the concept and the ideas have been so relevant to general practice and these are the things that I have taken back into the practice. So initially I had a lot of clinical that I thought I wanted to know but this fact has been a lot more useful. And you can keep it going and gain clinical experience on other courses.’

‘I think perhaps you didn’t really know what you didn’t know. I mean assertiveness training was on there and it never crossed my mind that I would need it. But actually it was really useful. I now feel more confident in dealing with things. It gave me all sorts of strategies and techniques. You know, it’s, like, a really good way of bridging the gap.’

‘I felt a lot less pressurised to cover the needs of the training programmes, more able to be “led” by the newly qualified GP in terms of what was useful for her. We still discussed some particular patients/diagnostic areas as she identified, but were able to discuss a much wider range of areas.’

‘...it also gives an opportunity to consolidate lots of skills, from the registrar year. Because I mean it’s so stressful the registrar year. Yeah, all the hogs, exams, certificates. We’re all in a bit of a panic. A lot to get everything done and you want to just get it done rather than put the effort into it and I know the scheme has given a little bit of support, people to ask and find things. But a very different way than locating. You know, it’s, like, a really good way of bridging the gap.’

‘I think that the choice of topics was perfect and the right point to learn these generic skills. I wasn’t aware they were areas I knew so little about so wasn’t able to see them as learning needs. The learning set has increased my self-awareness of what I don’t know and areas I can work on.’

We covered really useful topics during the learning set. Prior to the course, many of the topics were not areas I had thought would be necessary for us to cover. On reflection, they have been invaluable and very relevant to our future careers as GPs. Some of the topics we covered had knowledge that we had gained earlier in the year through the — Day release course. However, the pressure of exams at that time meant that I was not really very interested in thinking about these topics in much detail.’

‘The learning set sessions have also been beneficial in demystifying the work of a GP partner and giving us useful life skills.’

‘We are all agreed that these generic skills could not be the focus of a VTS course. It was felt that we were more receptive to these concepts post GP registrar year and hence were much more open to learning.’

‘I feel the learning set has given me insight into my true learning needs.’

The following sessions were rated highly by participants:

‘Role of practice assessor (n=6)
‘Mentoring (n=6)
‘Sports (n=6)
‘Dealing with difficult patients (n=6)
‘Challenging a patient (n=5)
‘type of patient (n=4)
‘Dealing with developing teaching skills (n=3)

General comments and suggestions for improvement

‘More support in finding a non-training practice [n=4]

‘More feedback about where to go next, especially concerning the non-training component in terms of contact and support [n=4]

‘Keep travel distances to a minimum (at an hour or less) to the Learning Set venue and ensure venues are appropriate [n=4]

‘The intensity of the week was seen as high, and time on the scheme very busy [n=4]

‘Focusing some time in the practices to undertake a specific project or service development [n=3]

Conclusion

This evaluation scheme has demonstrated that on completing traditional training, spending an extra few months in a training and non-training practice can boost confidence. It was also very evident that the scheme was not just aimed at improving the nature of the learning experienced refocused their awareness of need towards non-clinical areas, the relevance of which is often neglected. It is often difficult to see the relevance to practice of these learning days, and the scheme aims at providing a new focus on educational and career development.

Presenters

Dr. Clare Readburn, Associate Director, Wessex Deanery NHS Education South Central (NESC), University of Winchester, Innovation, Development and Wider Workforce, NHS Education South Central (NESC) and Honorary Fellow of the University of Winchester

Dr. Samantha Scallan, Research and Development Manager, Innovation, Development and Wider Workforce, NHS Education South Central (NESC) and Honorary Fellow of the University of Winchester