Advanced Practitioner Physiotherapist (APP) as first point of contact in GP Surgeries

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Background to the Project

- General practice is under considerable pressure with increasing workforce shortages and rising demand for health services leading to an unsustainable workload.

- Musculoskeletal (MSK) conditions account for up to 30% of GP consultations\(^1\) and are the most common cause of disability & work related ill health in the UK\(^2,3\).

- Inverclyde HSCP was chosen to work closely with the Scottish Government as a national test area for New Ways of Working in Primary Care. This pilot is one of the work-streams being tested.

- An Advanced Practice Physiotherapist (APP) is an expert in assessment, diagnosis and management of MSK conditions. The project seeks to evaluate an APP working as an alternative 1st point of contact within GP surgeries.
The Project Aim

This role offers a safe, cost effective alternative to the GP and brings additional patient benefits.
Advanced Practice Physiotherapist (APP)

- Advanced practice physiotherapists work at an **advanced level** within their physiotherapy practice and have the skills to **address complex decision-making processes** and **manage risk** in **unpredictable contexts**.5

- Physiotherapists incorporating advanced practice will have completed an advanced programme of studies and/or, are able to demonstrate the ability to work at an advanced/master’s level of practice.5
What did we do?

- Selected and trained an experienced APP in collaboration with GP stakeholders.

- Developed a robust patient selection process where patients were offered the option of seeing the APP, directly calling the surgery for an appointment.

- Placed the APP in 3 GP practices supporting a population of over 14,000. The practices varied in terms of size and socioeconomic factors.

- Gathered a range of qualitative and quantitative feedback to evaluate the project.
What is it like for the patient

- 20 minute appointment with the APP.

- Screened for Non MSK and serious pathologies.

- Offered assessment, MSK diagnosis and management plan which may include tailored advice and exercise, lifestyle, wellbeing and physical activity advice and signposting to community services.

- APP can order further investigations as required;
  - X-ray, MRI, Dexa scan, Ultrasound, Bloods

- Onward Referral as appropriate to other services, including:
  - Physiotherapy (for a course of treatment); Orthopaedics; A&E; Falls; Podiatry; Live Active; weight management

- APP can link directly with practice support pharmacist / GP regarding medication and fit-notes where required.
Source of referral

- 69% of patients seen by the physiotherapist attended ‘direct from reception’

- ‘GP suggested referrals’ made up the remainder of the patients attending the APP, this brought additional benefits;

- Releasing time for GPs in multi-problem consultations
- 2nd, specialist opinion where is unclear if the condition is MSK in nature
- Fast access to APP where minimal input is anticipated to support self management
Comparison of consultation outcomes
GP v APP Pathways

![Bar chart comparing consultation outcomes for GP (blue) and APP (red) in various categories such as Ex/Advice, Medication, Imaging, Bloods, Fit notes, Ortho, MSK Physio, and Review Appt.](chart.png)
APP Referrals & further investigation

- SSM: 64%
- MSK Physio: 29%
- Ortho: 3%
- A&E: 0.7%
- Other: 1%
- Injection: 0.5%
- Podiatry: 2%
Benefits to the Patient

- Provide timely access to expert MSK physiotherapy assessment, diagnosis and management.

- Promote patient empowerment through self management and signposting to community assets.

- Early management reduces unnecessary referrals onto secondary care and has patient safety benefits; less prescribing and imaging minimises the associated risk of diagnostic investigations and medication side effects.

These benefits are in line with National Clinical Strategy and Realistic Medicine approach.
Patient Feedback

- Consultation and Relational Empathy (CARE) Measure scores\(^6\): 48/50
- 95% were ‘very happy’ or ‘happy’ with their experience.

It set my mind at ease

The physio was very thorough in her examination and knows her subject well.

She quickly identified my problem and gave me information to treat myself at home with simple exercises

I felt I was listened to and received good advice
Direct benefit to GP Surgeries

- Release GP time
- Allows the GPs to focus on medical issues truly requiring GP attention
- GP can focus on non-MSK priority issues in those presenting with multiple problems.
- Having an APP as part of the team expands the expertise available with the practice
- Provides a positive development for GPs by working to support/mentor the APP and also learning from access to the specialist knowledge of the APP.
- Positive impact was noted on staff wellbeing and GP stress.

Once the model is developed fully, activity is predicted to be 14-16 appointments per day.
Of all the work that’s ever been done in GP practices, this has been the one that feels like it has truly taken work away.

Doctors have experienced a huge educational component to this pilot

Patients are safer – there is quicker access to the most appropriate intervention because triage assessment conducted by the physiotherapist gets people to the right place sooner.

Appreciate having access to a specialist – better than us at this.
Practice Manager & Receptionist Feedback

“ It feels good to be offering a service that makes a difference – everybody agrees that the patient is now seeing someone at an early stage who can provide them with the right advice.”

- Brings a specialist service into the local community, expending the expertise within the team
- Moves the idea of physio beyond being a rehab service
- Positive impact on everyone, not just the patients
- 100% receptionists rated this as a helpful initiative
- Frees up GP appointments on a daily basis
- We now get patients calling & asking for the physio instead of the GP
Benefits to the wider organisation

- Improve cost efficiency by reducing: - Prescribing costs, unnecessary imaging, referral to Orthopaedics.

- MSK physiotherapy have suggested;
  - More appropriate referrals with adequate detail allowing more accurate triaging
  - Patients are generally more reassured, and are already engaged in the self-management of their rehabilitation and in some cases are already improving.
  - Helping to reduce MSK physiotherapy waiting lists, 
    Cuts down on time required for initial assessment,
Safety

- Physiotherapists are autonomous practitioners, experts in their field and have sufficient training to help identify conditions masquerading as MSK presentations.

- Procedures have been established around access to medical support/GP appointments for a variety of clinical scenarios with differing degrees of urgency.

- Patient safety is enhanced by the APP & the GP working in collaboration and the sharing of patient records.

- Less prescribing and imaging minimises the associated risk of diagnostic investigations and medication side effects.
Key findings

- GPs have reported seeing fewer patients with MSK conditions, allowing more time to deal with patients with multiple complex co-morbidities.

- Model acceptable to patients as alternative to GP and value placed on seeing a specialist in their MSK condition.

- Patient receives longer consultation with specialist for less cost.

- Patient has an improved journey by early direction to the most appropriate management and reduced review visits to their GP.
Key findings cont.

- Many patients are empowered and supported to self-manage their condition without the need for onward referral to other primary and secondary care services.

- Patients managed by APP require less imaging, medication and onward referral to Orthopaedics.

- This model has provided a better understanding of the training and development needs for APP role in Primary Care.
Top Tips for Success

- A clear understanding of the role of the APP and how it differs from the traditional physiotherapy service is required.

- Training & support for practice managers & receptionists is essential to increase acceptance of their changing role.

- Being part of the practice team is essential as full benefits of post is dependant on practice engagement and support.

- Remaining part of the MSK service ensures consistent pathways & that best practice & networks/links are maintained.

- A robust induction process, competency training and ongoing clinical support is required for this APP role.

- Increasing the service users’ awareness of the changing models of care and the role of the APP in general practice would be beneficial for further success.
References


