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Title: Developing practice managers: Understanding the general practice management workforce

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Introduction:

Practice managers are an integral part of the primary care workforce. They are responsible for most non-clinical functions that occur in everyday running of the medical practice, and also for attending to the business aspects of running a practice. My project builds on a 2010/2011 summer student project which looked at the learning needs of administrative staff in Pegasus practices.

Currently several support structures are available for practice managers. Pegasus Health plays a large role in this through the Practice Support Liaison team and a helpdesk, both of which practice managers can go to for advice. Pegasus Health has also run several education sessions for practice managers and administrative staff, with each session focusing on a topic relevant to the job e.g. ethnicity data. Aside from Pegasus Health, practice managers can receive support from PMAANZ (Practice managers & administrators association of NZ) or through use of a website "HealthyPractice" but these are only available through a subscription and therefore are not accessed by all.

Aim:

My project aims to gain a better understanding of the general practice management workforce:

- To explore the variety in experience, scopes of practice and background of practice managers.
- To explore the ongoing educational needs of practice managers and resources they access for professional development.
- To explore factors that influence job satisfaction for practice managers.

Method:

The first stage of my research involved conducting preliminary interviews with practice staff. Different aspects of practice management were discussed, including: the role of a practice manager; the ways a general practice can be run; and the role of external organisations such as PMAANZ on practice management.

An online questionnaire was developed with SurveyMonkey and was sent to practice managers at the ninety-four Pegasus practices. The questionnaire consisted of three sections: background of practice managers; ongoing education needs; job satisfaction. Questionnaire findings were analysed on SurveyMonkey with simple tabulation.

A focus group was conducted, with discussion points informed by questionnaire responses. There were eleven participants, six of whom were practice managers. The focus group was recorded, transcribed, and thematic analysis was performed on this qualitative data.

Results:

The online questionnaire had a response rate of 54%. The practice management workforce was found to be made up of a great variety of people, in terms of previous occupation, the number of years worked in a general practice and tasks they consider to be part of their role.

The task respondents most wished to exclude from their role was reception duties, and the tasks they most wished to include were staff performance appraisals and strategic planning for business growth. In the past year, 78% of respondents had attended at least one of the Pegasus education sessions. Respondents indicated that such large group sessions were the most favoured method of receiving ongoing education, followed by peer/cluster groups. Just over 70% of respondents indicated that they felt that they were working to their full potential most or all of the time in their current workplace. Management contribution being valued in the practice team was the factor identified to have the greatest influence on job satisfaction.

The focus group found that the support and education services required by practice managers fall into two broad categories: skills training to equip practice managers to do their job well; and providing 'on-the-day' support as different issues arise. Participants reported that the large group education sessions have been valuable, and in the future, it would be helpful if sessions about legislative change occurred before the change itself so staff knew how to prepare for the change. Participants spoke of the benefits of PMAANZ and "HealthyPractice" in performing their jobs well, but also mentioned that it is often difficult to convince business owners that these resources are worth investing in. People talked about the need for a career pathway into practice management, and also how it would be valuable to have guidelines/pathways on how to perform specific tasks.

Conclusion:

The research found that those in practice manager roles vary greatly in their experience, background and scope of practice. This suggests that when support services are being developed, careful consideration needs to take place to ensure staff at all levels are adequately supported.

People expressed an interest in being in smaller peer groups which would allow participants to discuss specific cases in more detail, and also to foster collegiality. Such groups could be formal in nature i.e. where education material is provided, or they could be informal where members bring forth any issues they want to talk about. It was suggested that perhaps Pegasus Health could facilitate the initial formation of such groups.

One way of providing a career pathway into practice management could be through the development of a placement/apprenticeship programme. This would involve advanced practice managers mentoring those new to the workforce, allowing those starting out to have practical on-the-job experience.

Developing 'pathways' for practice management tasks would be valuable, and it would work similarly to how GPs and nurses can refer to Health Pathways to aid decision-making. Those new to practice management could refer to these 'pathways' to perform everyday tasks, and those in advanced roles can use them for more complex tasks that occur infrequently.

There are tasks in practice management which were deemed to be more difficult than others e.g. staff hiring/firing, and people felt they needed more support in these areas. This could be provided through skill-training sessions, establishing a pathway to perform these tasks, or for Pegasus Health perform tasks on behalf of the practice.