BMA

How to set up and develop a sessional GP group
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Why form one ?

Sessional GPs may experience professional isolation and reduced access to education, clinical information and career opportunities. Newly qualified GPs and GPs new to an area are particularly vulnerable to this. Whilst newly qualified GPs now have access to a range of "First5" initiatives, sessional GP groups have the advantage of putting younger GPs in contact with more experienced GPs.

Sessional GPs groups have been recognised as providing invaluable peer support for sessional GPs, with groups offering a range of services and benefits, including educational and social meetings, electronic mailings systems for vacancies and educational events. Models differ but there are some common themes and challenges. This guidance aims to share some of the models of good practice, and successful ideas and raise awareness about pitfalls.

What do they offer ?

Many groups set out to offer one or all of the following three things:

1. information about locum vacancies
2. opportunities for networking and peer support through meetings or the web
3. educational opportunities.

Some groups go further in providing mentoring schemes, representation and various cascades of local educational events. Increasingly the educational activities support the appraisal needs of sessional GPs.

Recruiting

One of the first steps to setting up a group is knowing how to contact sessionals and persuade them to join. You will want to check out whether there is an existing group you could join and build on, for example by checking the NASGP register of local groups or googling for local groups. The deanery's GP tutor network may also have information about local groups as these local tutors historically have extensive local knlowedge.

> The BMA will shortly be including on its website information about local sessional groups. Once this is operational, all sessional GP groups will be encouraged to add their details on the BMA's website.

Contacting sessional GPs can be done in one or more of the following ways:

1. ask the local BMA regional centre to set up a listserver group (one of the BMA employment advisers would act as lead reviewer and respond to technical queries and offer assistance as necessary)
2. ask the local BMA regional centre to mailshot local sessional GPs
3. ask local organisations to include your contact details (email, or e-group as above) as the organiser, in one of their newsletters or on their website eg your LMC, the deanery,
4. ask a friendly practice manager to cascade an email to local practices saying you wish to be contacted by sessional GPs (including personal email or egroup web address)
5. get some business cards made and give them out at educational meetings whenever you meet sessional GPs
6. ask the agency/organisation managing the local performers list to include details of your (embryonic) group and web address in their 'welcome pack'
7. arrange to visit and do a teaching session for the local NVTS about working as a locum and salaried GP and get members to sign up and pass on your details.

In the initial stages the focus is on building up numbers quickly, as people are more likely to get involved if they feel there is a substantive group to join. If you have elected to run your own group, rather than take advantage of the support offered by the BMA, you should be aware that managing a membership database can become onerous at this stage, and it then becomes worthwhile to try and have a simple website where people join up online and details are kept online. This may need to coincide with moving to a nominal membership fee to help create and maintain the website.

If practices become aware that there is a significant locum group to which locum vacancies can be cascaded, they can develop a keen interest in communicating with this group, and this in turn can drive further recruitment, especially amongst newly qualified GPs and GP new to an area.

Some groups may set membership criteria like engaging in appraisal, abiding by a code of conduct, minimum attendance at meetings, etc.

You may need to look into any necessity of registering the membership database under the Data Protection Act. Someone will need to be named as Data Controller.

Making your group known

There are a number of key organisations which you can ask to advertise your group:

1. BMA
2. LMC
3. deanery
4. clinical commissioning group
5. PCT in performers application ‘welcome pack’
6. NVTS- in information provided for trainees at end of scheme
7. RCGP local faculty
8. appraiser groups (may wish to signpost isolated locums to them)
9. local First Five group.

Well informed group members can be a valuable resource to local GP training scheme by offering a teaching session about how to work as a sessional GP.

The topics worth covering in such a session include:

- locums:
  - setting yourself up (NI, MDO, etc)
  - getting work
  - negotiation and agreeing terms
  - where to get guidance on rates
  - managing clinical risk (workload v experience, choosing your practice, whether to sign repeats etc, records, handovers, managing your own induction)
  - short versus longer terms locums
  - where to get support and advice
  - avoiding isolation-forming new networks of support
  - CPD and staying in the loop
  - pension contributions as a locum
  - BMA guidance
  - locum chambers model.

- salaried:
  - what to ask about a vacancy
  - the Salaried GP Model Contract
  - job planning and its importance
  - choosing a practice to fit you, what to look for
  - signposting to key sources of help: Focus on salaried GPs, in house performance review, salary range
  - BMA contract checking service
  - BMA salaried GP handbook
  - pitfalls of part-time work including CPD and staying in the loop
  - avoiding isolation- forming new networks of support.

The BMA can help with providing speakers on contract and employment issues. This also helps raise awareness of the value of the group for newly qualified GPs.

Funding

You may intially decide not to receive external funding and run without funds or be funded by membership fees. As a group grows, there are several advantages to having regular funding:

- this allow groups to fund a fully functional website
- pay an administrator to manage membership issues (bank cheques)
- pay for venues for meetings, social events and honoraria to members doing work on behalf of the group
- pay for data protection registration.

The BMA can provide some support to your group in the form of the administration related to arranging meetings, potentially provide a venue for the group to meet and appropriate refreshments. It is advisable to contact your local BMA regional centre to see what support can be made available. To be put in touch with your regional centre, please contact the BMA on 0300 123 1233 between 8.30 and 18.00 Monday to Friday.

Other sources of potential funding for groups include:

- pharmaceutical companies and PCTs have been known to fund group meeting costs
- some groups are funded by practices either paying for locum advertising or paying to receive a regular locum list of names and contacts
- some groups are funded and managed by LMCs
- some groups work closely with deanery tutors and may receive deanery funding for their educational activities
- others have received sponsorship from local RCGP faculties.

Generally most groups will not need to submit accounts to the tax office but should keep accounts for their members to scrutinise.

Types of meetings

These vary including:

- committee style business meetings - discussing shared professional issues
- social events
- educational meetings.

Often turnout can be significantly helped by :

- having two types of meeting in one evening, eg social and then educational, or business then educational
- keeping the meeting date on a set day of the month, eg first Tuesday of the month.

It is worth collaborating with your local GP tutor for sessional GPs if there is one (or persuading the deanery to establish one) on educational meetings.

Attendance at meeting remains a challenge for most groups, although useful discussion can be had with as few as 6-8 people. Difficulties can arise when decision-making is required at a meeting that is poorly attended. There are a few ways round this:

- have an on line voting or survey facility or use survey monkey
- elect members (eg chairman, secretary, treasurer) on an annual basis to take decisions without needing to refer to the wider group (guided by some explicit description of roles prior to their election and by an agreed constitution)
- set a rule about the number of meetings each member must attend (least recommended option)
- have a quorum of attendees (can leave the group at an impasse and unable to resolve important organisational issues if meetings are poorly attended).

Running the group

The number of individuals needed to do this depends on the size and complexity of the group. In small groups (less than 40), often only two individuals are required, but, as groups grow, more roles can be needed to share out the work of writing and banking cheques, organising and chairing professional members' meetings, educational matters, managing and updating the website, and liaising with outside organisations such as deanery, LMC and the BMA.
To keep groups evolving, the appointment process to these posts should be open and transparent with all posts being open to new nominations on a regular basis, usually annually. It helps if those involved have opportunities to meet with each other for mutual support and also to enable members recently involved in running the group to learn about other roles, so there can be some succession planning. A constitution becomes important in a larger group with a bigger 'executive' committee, so that responsibilities of these individuals and the democratic process are clear, with accountability for decision making, especially financial decisions. Various examples of constitutions can be found on group websites eg www.nelg.org.uk. Examples of roles include:

- chairman
- secretary
- treasurer
- social secretary
- LMC link person
- educational facilitator.

What are the benefits of a website?

A website almost always becomes a necessity at some point and whilst many people can set up simple web-pages to display information (also known as 'static' pages), at some point the running of the group will become significantly more efficient if the membership management and cascading are done via the website which will require proper programming expertise ie paying a web designer.

The benefits of a website can be summarised as follows:

1. less workload in dealing with membership applications as applicants complete their own details online
2. cheaper and less time consuming means of sending out information such as educational events, vacancies, newsletter or minutes (an online form can be linked to generate emails to all members and an automatically expiring listing on a webpage)

3. new members can obtain work quickly if they sign up to receive emails about locum vacancies
4. practices can contact locums more quickly by advertising online. The structured online form encourages practices to put essential information about their locum vacancy in the advert which in turns helps locums decide whether to consider taking on the work
5. advice to members can be placed on webpages thus reducing some of the workload for those running the group
6. running online surveys or elections
7. internal email group between members.

There are two potential difficulties of using groups to cascade information:

1 Ppotentially it can generate a lot of work for group leaders in posting information on webpages or emailing out members. This can be tackled by encouraging local practices to use the website's online form to add the information directly to the website. This means the data entry part is removed from group leaders. To avoid the inappropriate use of the group website, there needs however to be a vetting /moderation step whereby leaders can check the information is suitable before it goes live. Local providers of education can also be encouraged to post their information on the website directly using a simple form, which again is activated by a group leader. Alternatively educational flyers can be sent to a receptionist paid to enter the information on the group website. To reduce workload it is important that any vacancy and event type of information has an automated expiry field so that it does not have to be manually removed.

2 The members' needs for information can change over time and overload can become an issue. Members having a personal profile page where they sign up to various types of cascade can address this that they wish to receive, eg educational events, newsletters, vacancies etc. This form is also used to indicate whether they consent to having their contact details passed on to third parties for example, having their names and telephone numbers appear on a locum list which is then made available to practices.

Areas requiring care

1 Term and conditions of employment

Members may ask group leaders for employment advice. This cannot be part of a group leader's role because it is an expert role best left to the BMA, and carries a risk of litigation if incorrect advice is given. Instead members should be referred to the BMA for advice.

2 Quality assurance and checks for group members

Practices need to be disabused of the notion that the group carries out any quality control on its members. The group website and any locum lists published need to state clearly that it is the responsibility of practices to carry out employment checks (CRB, GMC, medical defence, performers list regulations and references). Groups may also need to consider what their policy is on membership for members under investigation or suspension. Given the support function of these groups, it may be appropriate to support continued membership, especially where the member is suspended under investigation (which is meant to be a neutral act), providing it is clear that the member abides by the suspension and that the group will necessarily report (to the GMC or PCT) any instances where they become aware that the suspended member is still accepting work.

3 Setting fees
The setting of locum fees between members of a locum group is considered to breach competition law with the significant risk of heavy fines by the Office of Fair Trading. Groups are therefore strongly advised not to make any covert or explicit agreements relating to fees or terms of work.

4 Group administration
As groups grow they may require more regular substantive input than can be provided by elected volunteer leaders. Paying individuals to help with administration runs the risk that the group becomes an employer with all the legal and tax liabilities that entails. Groups therefore need to be mindful of the arrangements they make to take on paid help. Some practices or LMCs may be able to offer administrative help. Members receiving honoraria for their work for the group do so on a self-employed basis and are liable for their own tax.

Useful resources

Support for Sessional GPs. Morrow G, Kergon C, Wright P. RMBF 2010.

How to set up and Run a Group for sessional GPs. Paula Wright BMJ Careers focus 2005

NASGP: The NASGP guide to setting up and running your very own sessional GP group.

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