

The evolution of advanced practice

The evolving landscape of advanced practice (AP) within the UK's healthcare system mirrors the dynamic and complex needs of contemporary healthcare. This transformation, while showcasing significant progress, has also encountered challenges, particularly regarding standardisation and differing regulatory frameworks. A notable development in this context has been the recent legislative change enabling paramedics to prescribe controlled drugs, marking a critical expansion in the scope of AP in the UK (College of Paramedics, 2023).

The UK's approach to the regulation of advanced practitioners lacks standardisation, which results in variability and potential risks within the sector. Each nation within the UK is developing its own frameworks for AP, yet the goal for a unified quality assurance standard across all regions remains unachieved (Health Education England, 2023). Implementing such standardisation would substantially enhance the consistency and quality of the roles fulfilled by advanced practitioners and, as a consequence, the quality of care delivered.

The drivers for the evolution of advanced practitioner roles are multifaceted, encompassing changing patient needs, improved service access, quality and continuity in care, and career progression opportunities for health and care professionals. These roles are integral in addressing specific patient care needs and contribute significantly to overall capacity of the healthcare system (Health Education England, 2023).

In the global context, countries such as Australia, Canada and the US have pioneered more uniform and structured approaches towards regulating and defining the roles of advanced practitioners within their healthcare systems. These approaches are characterised by well-

established credentialing processes and clearly defined competencies, which contribute to a more consistent understanding and acceptance of advanced practitioner roles. For instance, in Australia, the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Accreditation Council (ANMAC) sets rigorous standards for AP nursing, ensuring that practitioners meet high competency levels (ANMAC, 2019). Similarly, in Canada, the Canadian Nurses Association (CNA) provides a framework for nurse practitioners, encompassing standards for education, practice and regulation (CNA, 2020).

In the US, the American Nurses Credentialing Center (ANCC) and the American Association of Nurse Practitioners (AANP) play pivotal roles in credentialing and standardising AP roles, fostering a robust system that assures quality and consistency in practice (ANCC, 2021; AANP, 2022). These established processes not only streamline the roles of advanced practitioners, but also significantly enhance their professional recognition and the quality of care they provide.

The UK can benefit substantially from adopting similar models. By embracing these international precedents, the UK healthcare system could enhance the quality of care and elevate the professional recognition of practitioners at an AP level. Implementing a more uniform regulatory framework would bring several advantages. Firstly, it would ensure a consistent level of training and competency among advanced practitioners, thereby improving patient safety and care quality. Secondly, a standardised approach would facilitate greater mobility and recognition of qualifications, both within the UK and internationally, thus promoting the professional development and career advancement opportunities of advanced practitioners.

Furthermore, adopting a more structured and uniform approach to AP could potentially streamline the integration of various roles within the healthcare system, such as nursing, allied health professionals, paramedics, physiotherapists and pharmacists. This integration is crucial for a more comprehensive approach to patient care, as it not only increases the capacity of healthcare services, but also provides a more inclusive and efficient care experience for patients. It acknowledges the diverse needs of patients and utilises healthcare resources more effectively.

Recent initiatives are addressing the sector's challenges. The Centre for Advancing Practice have focused on establishing a recognised and visible workforce of advanced practitioners, accentuating the need for clinicians with advanced level training, education and experience. Moreover, the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) is actively reviewing the regulation of AP, seeking to clarify their position and incorporate stakeholder feedback (HCPC, 2021). The College of Paramedics (2023) has welcomed the legislative change allowing independent paramedic prescribers to prescribe controlled drugs, acknowledging their advanced clinical skills and vital role in the healthcare system. This inclusion exemplifies the expanding capabilities of advanced practitioners in the UK.

Reflecting on the changes that have taken place since I began my AP Master's programme in 2012, it's evident that the UK's advanced practitioners have shown a strong commitment to improving healthcare services. Despite ongoing challenges in standardisation and regulation, recent progress indicates a determination to enhance healthcare. By learning from international examples and more fully incorporating various roles into the AP framework, we could greatly improve the quality and effectiveness of healthcare delivery.

The evolution of the AP landscape aligns with broader healthcare trends, emphasising multidisciplinary and collaborative approaches. This shift is vital in meeting the complex health needs of the population, especially in a post-pandemic world where healthcare systems are adapting to new challenges and opportunities.

The path towards a more standardised and regulated AP environment in the UK faces further hurdles. The diversity of healthcare needs and the unique aspects of each healthcare profession require a flexible yet stringent framework that accommodates these variations while upholding high practice standards. This balance is crucial to ensure that AP roles effectively meet healthcare demands and are recognised as essential components of the healthcare system.

As the UK's AP landscape continues to evolve, ongoing dialogue with patients and stakeholders—including healthcare professionals, policymakers and educators—is imperative. This collaborative approach may safeguard that AP development remains responsive to the healthcare system's changing needs and positively contributes to care quality in the UK.

Integrating advanced practitioners in various roles, including nursing, allied health professionals, paramedicine, physiotherapy and pharmacy, reflects a more comprehensive approach to patient care. This integration not only increases healthcare services' capacity, but also offers a more inclusive care experience for patients. It facilitates a deeper understanding of patient needs and more efficient use of healthcare resources.

In summary, the ongoing transformation of AP in the UK indicates the healthcare system's adaptability and responsiveness to changing demands. With careful consideration of standardisation, regulation and diverse role integration, AP's future appears promising and looks set to significantly enhance patient care and healthcare delivery across the UK.