

The Role of Physician Associates in Ireland

RCSI University of Medicine and Health Sciences Physician Associate Programme was launched in 2016, and its graduates have played a critical role during the Covid-19 crisis. They have worked across surgical and medical services, with a number staffing some of the hospital testing facilities.

There are now over 135,000 PAs practicing in the US, and the UK has over 35 programmes graduating over 750 PAs annually.

In November of last year, Professor Lisa Mustone Alexander was appointed Director of RCSI's Physician Associate Programme.

Alongside leading the development and delivery of the RCSI PA programme, Professor Alexander will play an important role in advocating for the recognition of physician associates in the Irish healthcare system and in promoting the value of the role to healthcare professionals.

"With the increasing demands on healthcare systems during the Covid-19 pandemic, educating and utilising physician associates is important now more than ever," said Professor Alexander.

In this article, *Hospital Professional News* spoke to some of those on the programme about the role of Physician Associates in Ireland.

Aoife Sartini-Bhreachach



I work at the Mater Hospital in Dublin. I graduated from Physician Associates studies in 2019, and I currently work as a surgical physician associate in Breast and general surgery. A relevant undergraduate degree is mandatory for entry into the Physician Associate programme in RCSI. I obtained a BSc in Biomedical sciences (Hons) in 2012 and enjoyed four years in clinical research following graduation.

I chose to study for my MSc in Physician Associate studies as I was excited to pioneer a new career, and I truly believe that we can make a difference to healthcare in Ireland. As part of my role as a surgical physician associate, I have the opportunity to assist in theatre, assess patients in clinic and remain involved in research.

Aaron Brady



I graduated with a masters in Physician Associate Studies from RCSI class of 2021, and I recently commenced employment with the Bon Secours Hospital Cork. I am working on a busy General, Endocrine and Breast surgery service alongside my supervising Consultant Surgeon, Mr Peter O'Leary.

My role is very patient-centred, and I work closely with Mr O'Leary in all aspects of perioperative patient care. I am responsible for conducting daily ward rounds with my supervising Consultant which consists of reviewing the health history, performing a physical examination and reviewing laboratory and radiology results of each patient. A treatment plan is then devised and documented in the medical notes. I play a key role in ensuring that the all aspects of the treatment plans are carried out in a timely manner. This may involve liaising with other members of the MDT such as nursing staff, clinical nurse specialists, physiotherapy, occupational therapy and discharge co-ordinators to ensure that all of the patients' medical needs are addressed. I also ensure that patients who are deemed fit for discharge home are done so in a timely manner by making sure their paperwork is prepared in advance.

Research is also a central part of my day-to-day role. I am involved in several ongoing studies. We will soon be recruiting for an international, prospective inguinal hernia study known as the RETAINER study. We hope to have our own clinical trial up and running in the near future. In addition, I maintain several databases for the practice including a pan-European Endocrine Surgical database known as Eurocrine where our data is recorded prospectively.

The continuity of care I provide, as a Physician Associate, benefits both the medical team and the patients, and inevitably results in a more efficient service. The Bon Secours Hospital is providing a great platform for the Physician Associate profession to flourish, and I believe the future of the PA role in the Bon Secours Hospital Cork is bright.

Maria Macken



I work at the Mater Hospital in the area of Spinal Surgery and Treatment. My responsibilities include caring for patients on the ward, assisting in theatre and assisting in the clinic. On any given day, I will be reviewing patients on the wards, following their laboratory and imaging investigations, assisting with patient care technical procedures and discussing patient findings with consultants and members of the team. My activities related to the theatre include listing patients, conduct pre-operative assessments, and assist in surgery. Specific responsibilities related to spinal patients include arranging transfer to and from National Spinal Injuries Unit (NSIU).

In the clinic, I review and examine new patients, post-op patients and imaging (X-ray and MRI). All cases are discussed with the consultant and a treatment plan is formulated accordingly. My interactions with patients are quite a big part of my position. I discuss and clarify questions about treatment plans, help them navigate the system, and facilitate appointments and continuity of care by communicating with GPs as needed.

Javier Rojas



I am a Physician Associate (PA) working in Our Lady's Hospital in Navan, allocated to the Gastroenterology team for more than a year now. I practice medicine under the supervision of my consultant physician, with a model that can be described as delegated autonomy. I assist with all aspects of patient care, including endoscopy. We have been able to establish an IBD clinic, where I see patients, assist with the management of their illness, and provide continuity of care from visit to visit. My interactions with the rest of the multidisciplinary team are extremely positive. I feel completely integrated into the team and enjoy a high level of responsibility to ensure the highest quality of care for our patients. In addition to my clinical work, I actively participate in the education of PA students by collaborating closely with the Royal College of Surgeons in Ireland (RCSI) faculty by providing lectures and serving as an examiner for many of the assessments.

I feel the whole medical team, but specially my consultant, are committed to this model of practice and they have helped to elevate my role by providing additional training and professional development.

I look forward to when our profession is fully regulated by the appropriate body, similar to what has occurred in the US and is now occurring in the United Kingdom. The overarching goal should be to increase access to high quality care for every patient who seeks to optimise their own personal health.

Sometimes, I am frustrated by professional groups who are negative about our role since in my opinion, they often are unaware of the depth and breadth of our training. Our profession is not a threat to anyone... we merely want to help bring innovation to the health system with the goal of improving patient outcomes.

I have had incredibly positive experiences in my short career as a PA and I accept that part of being a pioneer is winning over people's hearts and minds. Along with my professional colleagues, we are not daunted by this challenge!

Maeve Cahill



I am a PA working in Galway Clinic ED. My primary role is with patients who present with any cardiac symptoms. I see the patients directly, assess, examine and implement

a plan (ECG, laboratory investigations, echocardiography, etc.).

I then discuss the patient with the ED consultant and liaise directly with the cardiologist on call. I complete the admissions for all cardiology patients, and I see other medical and surgical patients that present as a secondary role. To help with the patient flow, I carry out a history and physical exam and present this to the ED consultants.

Alexandra Troy



I have been working in the General and Colorectal Surgical service in Beaumont Hospital since I graduated from the first Physician Associate Studies class in 2018. I work with a number of consultants, but I am primarily attached to one. I engage in ward rounds, outpatient clinics, assist in surgery and do a PA lead virtual outpatient clinic for benign histology for endoscopy results and minor procedures (e.g. excision of sebaceous cysts, lipomas, etc.) that have been reviewed by my consultants.

I examine patients in clinic, make diagnosis and discuss treatment options with my consultants. I organise pre-assessment for patients and the surgical lists for theatre, which helps reduce waiting list times. I help coordinate pre- and post-operative care of these patients too.

I spend a lot of time with patients and enjoy answering any of their questions or concerns they may have about their upcoming surgery. In July with the change over, I help the new team members settle into their roles by being that continuity of care across the service.

Jessica Maddock

I am one of six PAs to graduate from the first cohort of RCSI trained Physician Associates in 2018. My first PA role was in pre-assessment, but I have recently taken up a new post in Bariatric Surgery in Dublin.

In my new PA role, I am part of the multidisciplinary team that works towards caring for patients attending for bariatric services. The team includes a consultant bariatric surgeon, consultant bariatric physicians, dietitian, psychologist and now a PA. In my role, I assist in theatre, perform

patient education, provide pre-op and follow up care, round on inpatients, get involved in research and perform other clinical tasks.



As this post is new, it is still developing and very exciting. Outside of work, I am on the board of directors for the Irish Society of Physician Associates (ISPA), which represents PAs working in Ireland.

Orla Brett



I am a physician associate working in general and upper GI surgery in Beaumont Hospital. I work alongside the surgical team in a variety of settings including theatre, surgical wards and outpatient clinics. I also play a role in communicating weekly MDT outcomes with GPs and consultants.

I work as the first assistant for robotically assisted minimally invasive oesophagectomies alongside my consultant surgeon. I liaise closely with our elective surgical patients perioperatively, ensuring they are adequately assessed prior to admission. I review new and returning patients in our outpatient clinic with the support of my team and consultant. I have been working with my team in Beaumont Hospital for two years, offering continuity of care within the service, particularly for our cancer and elective surgical patients.