

NES Pharmacy Podcast – Ailsa MacDonald

Elsbeth Boxall

Hello and welcome to the next in the series of our NES pharmacy podcasts. Today, the aim of this podcast is to give you an insight into the role of the pharmacist designated prescriber or DPP, which we will call them and illustrate the importance of this role in developing pharmacists as independent prescribers.

We are joined today by Alisa MacDonald, the NES Principal Lead for Prescribing and Clinical Skills, who can give us an insight into why this role is so important and the support available in undertaking it. So welcome, Alisa, and thank you so much for joining us today. Obviously, I've introduced you briefly, Alisa, but can you tell us a little bit about your pharmacy career so far?

Ailsa MacDonald

Thanks for asking me along today, Elspeth. Yep. So, I started in Community pharmacy and did my training there and was a manager in Community pharmacy for a couple of years before I got into working in Primary Care and that came through just taking up an opportunity that was offered by the, the Health Board and that and so, I had worked in Primary Care for approximately 10 years and got my IP and during that time and then at that point actually I went back into community pharmacy for about 18 months or so and yeah, then decided actually primary care was probably where I would be using my skills better at that point in time.

So went back into primary care again. Throughout that time, I've had on-off relationships with NES.

So, I was one of the facilitators when I worked in Forth Valley, organizing a kind of evening, evening events and then I've had secondments as well throughout. So, when the opportunity came up to work within NES on a more permanent basis, then I grasped that with both hands. So, it's, it's great to do what I do now.

Elsbeth Boxall

That's great Alisa, it sounds like you, you know your varied experience is ideal really for the role that you have now. So can you tell us just a bit about your current role in supporting designated prescribing practitioners or maybe we should call them DPP's, so it's a bit easier.

Ailsa MacDonald

Yeah, absolutely. So, as the principal lead for prescribing and clinical skills at NES then I ensure that the potential DPP's have access to the information and the resources that can support them to take on the role initially.

NES also provides the supervisor peer support, which is more general, but that DPP's can access should they wish to once they've undertaken that role. I think it's important to remember that at present, trainee independent prescribers complete a standalone IP course through a university. So, NES currently fund the IP courses both for the Robert Gordon University and University at Strathclyde. So, both courses that are available in Scotland.

So therefore, at the moment the appropriateness and equality management of DPP currently sits with the universities, which includes them offering DPP induction sessions and ongoing support while they are supporting a trainee through the course.

However, many of the listeners will be aware that from 2026, new pharmacists will be prescribers, and this means that as part of the NES Foundation training year programme there will be a supervisory requirement for trainee pharmacists to have a DPP, so, because the learning of, the learning and the period of learning in practice and the assessment of the GPhC prescribing related learning outcomes are all incorporated into that FTY programme then NES will be responsible for the quality management of trainee pharmacist DPP's.

So, this means then that NES will provide induction sessions and opportunities for DPP's to peer, to peer assess themselves against each other, who are taking on the role and also provide ongoing support from both the foundation training year team. So basically, then NES will start to provide a very similar role to what the universities do just now for the stand-alone courses.

Elsbeth Boxall

That's, that's brilliant Alisa. It's great to have that that insight into the background of why things are changing just now and it's obviously a really exciting time to become involved in the DPP programme with all with all this going on. So that's, that's really, really helpful. I think what is important for us to understand Alisa, why, why do we need DPP's? I think you can give us, you know, a good insight into that.

Ailsa MacDonald

Sure. Well, we need DPP's to share their prescribing expertise so that we can develop similar skills in the wider workforce and more and more this will include our early careers

pharmacists who are undertaking their post registration foundation programme that now incorporates they're independent prescribing training and then as we've mentioned already thinking, towards August 2025, our trainee pharmacists will be starting the FTY programme, that will include their IP training too.

So DPP's can share their prescribing knowledge, their clinical assessment, and their consultation skills and their clinical decision-making skills so that the trainee IP's are prepared to become safe and autonomous prescribers, that know their scope of practice and that can recognise when presentations or decisions may be out with their competence and that they need to refer on to the most appropriate healthcare professional.

I think often the most effective learning is experiential. So not only observing real life scenarios but practicing under that supervision safety net and then receiving the feedback from that supervision on your skills and behaviours needed for prescribing really helps to shape the quality of the patient care provided by the IP trainees in their future role as a prescriber.

Elsbeth Boxall

That's, that's great Alisa, I really, I really like the phrase supervision safety net. I think that really summarises the situation well. You know, asking people to do all the training, you know, they're really there as a kind of sounding board and someone to give, you know, active feedback. So that that's, that's really explains that really, really well.

Ailsa MacDonald

Absolutely. Yeah, it's definitely that kind of being allowed to be a mirror and kind of reflect back, what, what, what are their capabilities at the moment and, and how do you continue to improve the quality of them? Is definitely one of the key things of being a DPP.

Elsbeth Boxall

Yeah, that's, that's really, that's it makes that really clear, I think. So, I think that will clear things up for a lot of people, but kind of getting down to the nitty gritty, I guess, how, how many DPP's do we actually, actually need? Obviously, this is a period of great change. So how, how many do we need, what's the number?

Ailsa MacDonald

Well, we're keen for pharmacy as a profession to be able to sustain its own pool of DPP's in the future, though we do recognise the importance of having the input and the feedback from

our other healthcare professional colleagues, because that really helps to broaden our perspectives, our skills and our behaviours that relate to prescribing.

But really, anyone eligible to be a DPP will have had support of others to achieve their IP qualification. So, I think that's really important to remember as a profession that we return the investment that we've had in us to invest in the development of our professional colleagues.

So, at present, NES fund approximately 350 pharmacists per year to undertake a standalone IP course and for the recent courses we've had between 40 and 60% of IP trainees have had a pharmacist DPP so it's definitely becoming embedded within the culture of pharmacy to support others on their professional journeys. In fact, from our NES records, we know that almost 200 pharmacists self-identify as a DPP at present.

But you were asking about numbers. So, our greatest demand for DPP's is going to be between 2025 and 2028, whilst we transition to IP being incorporated into the FTY programme. Yeah, because we'll still have the post registration foundation pharmacists completing their IP course along with more established pharmacists still doing so too.

So, from that perspective, in 2025, we may need up to 500 DPP's and we would be keen for a high percentage of those to be pharmacists. On saying that though, I mean there may be experienced pharmacists who could and would be willing to take on a couple of trainee IP's within one year and, and obviously that will have an impact on the overall numbers of DPP's that will be required.

Elsbeth Boxall

That, that's great. So, it sounds like you really just kind of need as many people to get involved as possible Alisa is that right?

Ailsa MacDonald

Absolutely. Absolutely. Yeah. To invest in our future as a profession and I think when, when people feel supported, they're really gonna flourish. So, taking that wee bit of time out to support others can, can be really beneficial for, for everyone.

Elsbeth Boxall

Absolutely and what does the, the role of the DPP actually involve?

Ailsa MacDonald

OK, so to be a DPP, there are some general Pharmaceutical Council requirements that you have to meet. So that will include that you need to be an active independent prescriber, undertaking patient facing activities and it's to be in an area of practice that's relevant to the trainee pharmacists learning environment.

That's the first thing you should be prescribing in line with the RPS prescriber competency framework, but people will have worked through that to gain their IP qualifications so people will be familiar with that competency framework, and you should have appropriate knowledge and expertise to develop trainee IP's or in future training pharmacists and their prescribing practice.

Now, having supported the development of other pharmacy team members or other healthcare professionals, either as part of experiential learning or perhaps as a sessional supervision during a trainees IP period of learning and practice will really help to prepare you well for undertaking the role.

Elsbeth Boxall

That's great Alisa. So that's sort of describes what qualifications you kind of need, experience you need, but sort of on a practical level, you know how, how does the DPP work with the trainee? How would you describe that?

Alisa MacDonald

Sure. OK. So DPP's should meet initially with the trainee to discuss a plan just to meet the required learning outcomes during their period of learning in practice. So, this will involve thinking about how the trainee can be supervised while being involved in direct patient contact and that has to be for a minimum of 90 hours.

So, the DPP does not need to be the person supervising for the all the 90 hours. In fact, I would probably say it's beneficial that they take the op, or the trainee takes the opportunity to gain insight from a range of prescriber colleagues.

However, the DPP does need to have had sufficient interaction and observation of the trainee IP, just so that they're comfortable that they are consistently demonstrating the required learning outcomes.

If you think often DPP's have an established network of colleagues so that they can suggest that the trainee contacts them to enhance their period of learning in practice just so that they've got a range of learning environments and experiences that they can then draw upon when they become prescribers themselves.

It's also encouraged that the DPP periodically meets up with the trainee during the period of learning in practice, and that's just to see how they're progressing towards meeting the learning outcomes and if there's any changes that they need in their kind of planned activities and, and there's a suggestion that the time should be set aside formally, to do that, have a kind of progress meeting, I suppose approximately every six weeks or so.

I would also say that besides being a good role model for IP trainees, one of the key roles of DPP for me, whether you're directly observing the trainee IP or at these progress meetings, is to provide the constructive feedback and by that, I mean feedback that is detailed enough regarding the skills and behaviours that the trainee is demonstrating to allow them to continue to improve their practice, but it also provides reassurance on what specifically, that they're doing well when they are demonstrating the skills and behaviours to the expected standard and if we think about those conversations, that's not just the only thing. The other thing we need to think about is in where, where these conversations are taking place or where the learnings taking a place.

So, it's ideal if the DPP can think about the learning environment too and specifically, will the trainee IP feel safe? Will they feel supported, and would they feel comfortable enough to voice the limits of their knowledge or the limits of their skills, just so in order that they gain the most out of their time within that environment and within the supervisors that they have and then if we think progressing through the course and towards the end of the 90 hours and towards the pulling together of the portfolios, then the DPP will have a final meet up with the trainee IP and that's when they feel confident that they are consistently demonstrating the expected standards of practice and the required learning outcomes.

So, the DPP will then feel confident enough to complete any portfolio sign off as directed by the universities or in future by NES for trainee pharmacists on the FTY programme.

Elsbeth Boxall

No, that's great. So, really in terms of time commitment, it doesn't sound hugely onerous because there's lots of people involved, it's not just the DPP and the, you know, the trainees working independently a lot of the time, is that right?

Ailsa MacDonald

Absolutely. I mean I think it goes back to what I was saying earlier about almost like a culture of supporting others on their professional development. So even if you don't feel that at the moment, being a DPP is, is quite where you're at, it may be that you feel confident enough to

offer some supervision time for half a day or whatever and, and, and, and you have that recent experience of, of going through the course yourself.

So, you can pass on those nuggets of information and experience to the trainee and or it may be actually that you feel that you are now able to support those earlier on in their career development through like experiential learning or, or some of the trainee pharmacists time and in which case that may release those potentially more experienced IP's to support those going through the IP and be DPP's and therefore I think it's about everybody contributing something to the level of what they feel that they are able to just now within their kind of experience and then so and do kind of releasing that time for DPP's that we're going to need in the coming years.

Elsbeth Boxall

Absolutely, it's a, it's a team effort, isn't it? So yeah.

So, I mean, we've talked a lot about what you know, the how the important the DPP's are for the trainees but you know what, what are the, what are the benefits to, to a DPP and to, to the, the rest of the profession of, of someone becoming a DPP.

Ailsa MacDonald

With introduction of the Royal Pharmaceutical Society, core advanced pharmacist curricula, being a DPP, enables you to demonstrate several learning outcomes. In fact, the RPS even highlights which learning outcomes these are, and it's not just in the educational domain, but also because of your experience that you have, that enables you to be a DPP, it also covers in professional practice and, and there's a large element of the leadership and management too.

So recently the Scottish Directors of Pharmacy have endorsed the use of the RPS core advanced pharmacist curriculum as a tool for continuing professional development. So, I guess this is potentially a benefit from the DPP's individual perspective that they're gaining evidence for their career development portfolios. I'm also. Yes. Sorry.

Elsbeth Boxall

No, you're saying, but yeah, I mean, I was just thinking, yeah, and benefits for others, you know, in the profession.

Ailsa MacDonald

Yeah, I guess there's kind of two sides that isn't and it's about going back to those conversations that you have between the trainees and the DPP's. So, from the DPP

perspective, then that may help you to reflect on your own practice through the trainees, asking questions or raising points through those discussion and, and I guess that can stimulate you as a DPP to remain abreast of new developments within therapeutic a, therapeutic areas I guess, um, and from that I guess you would ensure that your patient care that you're providing aligns with the most up-to-date evidence.

But I guess from the trainee pharmacist perspective, the insight of having somebody that's gone through a very similar university course to themselves, then you've got that additional understanding of what the expectations are and how you can achieve a successful outcome.

So that's those conversations can be beneficial both ways and I guess from the DPP knowing that you have that experience and have gone through that course and can support somebody else to achieve their professional development goals can be, can be really rewarding too.

I think you mention, you mentioned there as well about being more kind of holistic from a kind of professional perspective and I guess the greater number of pharmacists that we have engaging and supporting others, then the more that this becomes part of the pharmacy learning culture in Scotland and I think having these kind of greater opportunities for meaningful peer engagement can be really beneficial in, in what at times can be an isolating profession.

Elsbeth Boxall

Yeah, absolutely. Alisa is it; it can be and it's this just sounds like it's a really great opportunity for personal development really wherever you are in your career, you know what whatever stage so that's, that's really helpful. Obviously looking just at the flip side, are there any potential barriers to becoming a DPP that you can see and, and how, how can we overcome those for people?

Ailsa MacDonald

Yeah, well at, at present both Universities as part of the GPhC accreditation requires that DPP's should generally have three years prescriber experience. But as I mentioned earlier, if you have less experiences as a prescriber, then you could still offer to support others during their period of learning in practice and that can help you prepare you for undertaking the DPP role just by getting an understanding of the current requirements and that they are providing feedback and having those constructive conversations um and enabling that reflections of the trainees.

The proposals submitted by NES to the GPhC for being a trainee pharmacist DPP at the moment don't state a time limit and therefore we hope that this will allow a little more

flexibility for those with a strong supervisory experience to be trainee pharmacist DPP's during the FTY programme.

So, we're currently strongly encouraging designated supervisors who have not yet undertaken the IP course, to consider this in preparation for this increased demand that we're expecting from 2025 onwards and then I think secondly, we appreciate the time commitment to the role can be a barrier for some and again thinking about DPP's wider professional network and how they can facilitate learning opportunities through these can help to alleviate some of those pressures.

It's important to get the support of your employer to undertake this role, just so that you have sufficient time to undertake it, and indeed thinking kind of going forward within FTY, then employers need to confirm that they can provide a DPP as part of the FTY recruitment process to host a trainee pharmacist.

So, it's hoped that there will be a strong employer support for this in future because of that.

One of the other things is at times some pharmacists raise that they do not regularly use physical assessment skills in day-to-day practice, and they feel this means they cannot take on the role and again that doesn't rule out being a DPP, it just means that the potential DPP needs to use that wider healthcare team to provide the learning and the assessment for the trainee IP for this aspect.

At NES we run, a regularly run clinical skills training days at venues across Scotland and we do have a standing agreement with the venues that there can be one or two observers at these sessions and that's perhaps potentially for supervisors who want to improve their capabilities, to assess others taking undertaking physical assessment skills.

Another thing that NES has recently done was deliver similar sessions for designated supervisors who, to help them prepare for assessing physical assessment skills and training pharmacists and finally, NES are wanting to make it as streamlined as possible to apply to be a trainee pharmacist DPP, and therefore we anticipate adopting a self-declaration form that states that applicants have self-assessed themselves against the RPS competency framework for designated prescribing practitioners and this differs slightly from the application process at the moment for universities, who tend to be an application process plus a CV, and then the universities ensure that their DP, potential DPP expertise matches the learning needs of the trainee IP.

So, it's going to differ slightly from that perspective, but it will align to a similar process of designated supervisors for FTY at the moment.

Elsbeth Boxall

Yeah, that's great. Alisa, it does sound like NES have really thought about this and are trying to make it as, as straightforward as possible for people, which is really helpful. So, kind of following on from that and what resources do you NES provide to support DPP's?

Ailsa MacDonald

So, we have a dedicated page for potential DPP's on the platform TURAS Learn and, and that guides pharmacists through the expectations of a DPP. It gives you some ideas to support learners through their period of learning in practice and, and it also has resources to make the application process easier.

So, to prepare for taking on any supervision role, then NES has a range of supervision e-learning modules that need to be completed, and these modules are transferable for supervision support.

So even if you're doing student experiential learning right the way through to supporting those undertaking advanced practice, these modules fit so therefore potential DPP's will already be completed most, if not all of these modules.

NES also provide resources on how to complete supervised learning events, which is a kind of key component of the kind of learning in practice and building up a portfolio um and also about how to provide feedback to trainees. So, these should be useful for those that do not have experiences of using the different supervised learning event or SLE tool formats at the moment.

So, thinking for supporting trainee IP's and thinking about the kind of learning outcomes etc, then we generally suggest that undertaking mini-cex SLE's provides excellent opportunities to provide feedback on consultation skills and shared decision making with patients and then a different format called case space discussions really enables robust discussion around the relevant knowledge and the clinical decision-making skills for the trainee while DOPS, which stands for the direct observation of procedures, allows for the feedback on physical assessment skills.

So, thinking as well from other things that NES do, there's.....

So, I'm kind of thinking about other opportunities that NES provides also. They provide opportunities for supervision peer review every couple of months and, and those can be booked on the TURAS Learn course bookings page and that can be where DPP brings queries

or any points of clarification from there along and they can get a discussion with their peers or facilitators related to that role so that.

I would encourage people to attend one of them. It's also always a good way of getting that kind of peer discussion as part of your revalidation as well coming along to these things and then we're thinking, we're all very aware that from 2025 being a DPP for a trainee pharmacist there will be different expectations of the standards that a, the pharmacist will be, will be working at and that, that will be new to many people.

So therefore, at present from August 2025, NES intend to offer, offer a longitudinal peer support group for DPP's that year, so that there are, they feel sufficiently supported at each stage of that FTY year, particularly when it's new to everybody and we hope that that will just enable DPP's to best support their trainees to meet the prescribing related early learning outcomes um and through that assessment process of them as well.

If you're interested, particularly in, in what's coming within the FTY year, then there is more information on a dedicated page on TURAS Learn that communicates all the upcoming changes to the FTY programme from 2025 onwards.

Elsbeth Boxall

That's great Alisa, so it definitely sounds like if you're interested the first place to go will be the TURAS Learn page because all the resources are coordinated there, so yeah, that's definitely make, we'll make sure the links to those resources are available. That's brilliant.

So, you know if you really just had a takeaway message for people who are thinking about becoming a DPP, what, what would it be?

Alisa MacDonald

So personally, I think over the next three years or so, whilst our profession is transitioning to prescribing being integrated into the undergraduate and FTY programme, we're going to have our highest demand for pharmacist prescribers to support the professional development of our early career's pharmacists particularly through the supervision of these prescribing related skills.

So, I think I would be encouraging those that have benefited from others investing in them during their IP training to now respond to this by investing their expertise and supervisions in others.

Indeed, when we are offering NES funded IP places, now that we include that, there's an expectation that those receiving funding will be DPPS in future and I guess if you're not

currently eligible to be a DPP, then offer some supervision support for the period of learning in practice just to help defuse those supervision responsibilities more widely across the profession because being a DPP is not a sole responsibility and it's really important to encourage the trainee IP's to gain from the expertise and experience of a wide range of healthcare professionals.

I mean, we'll want these prescribers who can work safely and autonomously and it's important for the DPP's to encourage this recognition of the trainees scope of practice, whilst giving them the confidence to continue to expand, expand that limit of their competence and continue learning and seeking feedback once they're qualified because we're all in our continuous professional development, once we've got our qualification, we don't stop there. We're always going to continually to be learning and evolving in our prescribing practice in the patient care that we're delivering.

So, I guess ultimately what I'm saying is that seeing others flourish into that prescribing role through your support is really rewarding and I would encourage anyone that's interested either to get in touch with their health board or their employer, education and training leads just to note their interest in supporting others by being a DPP.

Elspeth Boxall

That's, that's really incredibly useful. Alisa, thank you very, very much that that has been a great insight into the role of the DP and the background behind it and also into the resources that are available to support DP's and undertaking this role and I really, I really hope that after listening to this today, it's just giving people the confidence to take that next step and look at the resources and, and, and hopefully become DPP's and support their, their colleagues to be prescribers, which as you said, benefits the whole profession overall.

So really appreciate your time Alisa, that's been really fantastic, and we will make sure that the links to those resources you've mentioned are available and they're all on the, the NES websites through TURAS, but we'll make sure those links are accessible for everybody. So, thank you very much. Alisa, that's been great. Thank you.

Ailsa MacDonald

Thanks for asking me along today, Elspeth. Thank you. I appreciate that.