

admin

News for UNISON members
in the NHS clerical and admin sector

matters

Over 100 medical secretaries from across the UK attended the union's second medical secretaries' conference in London.

This is a special conference issue of Admin Matters to enable us to cover the conference in greater detail.

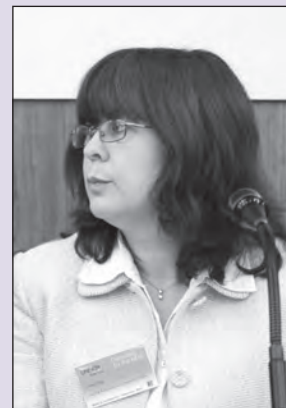
At a crossroads

Karen Jennings, UNISON national secretary for health, said that medical secretaries were at a crossroads. She praised the role medical secretaries had played in the development of the NHS. "When a patient phones up for an appointment, requires an operation or a hospital bed, it is the medical secretary that makes it happen." She went on to say that the "NHS is changing and medical secretaries will adapt. In particular medical secretaries can help the NHS in communicating with increasingly assertive patients".



The conference was opened by Tina Cross, (pictured right) vice chair of the admin and clerical sector.

She said, 'this conference was an opportunity for medical secretaries to have a voice in shaping the future of the NHS.'



Medical secretaries keep the NHS teams running



Medical secretaries are the key to keeping the multidisciplinary teams of the NHS moving and working together. That was the message from John Black of the Royal College of Surgeons. They are the glue between the GP on the one hand and the consultant on the other. However cutbacks mean that the continuity of care that medical secretaries help provide is under threat. "The NHS without medical secretaries is like an aeroplane with a couple of engines missing," he commented.

Medical secretaries make a difference to patient care



Hilary Roberts

Medical secretaries are not backroom staff and they do make a difference to patient care. That was the message emerging from the first workshop of the conference that looked at the current issues facing this group of staff. Although medical secretaries know their own worth, recognition of the role they can play is not shared by all – they have to handle high workloads and often feel both isolated and undervalued.

Many medical secretaries see respect for their own role closely linked to the consultants they work for. However, they also believe they can play a wider role in ensuring that the different parts of the NHS work together to improve patient care.

The workshop was facilitated by Dave Godson (UNISON national officer) and Hilary Roberts, medical secretariat manager at Barking, Havering and Redbridge University Hospitals NHS Trust (BHRUT) and member of BSMA (British Society of Medical Secretaries and Administrators). For more details on the activities of the BSMA go to bsmsa.org.uk/



Where to go?

The second workshop was on career pathways.

Despite the wide range of skills medical secretaries provide for the NHS, there is no clear career path into which they can develop.

The traditional route in the past has been from typing pool to medical secretary. However, having achieved this level there appears to be no obvious progression for medical secretaries. Some have made it into management, and in a few isolated examples some have developed into a role with a higher banding through PALS (Patient Advice and Liaison Services) but such examples are too few and far between.

However, there was no shortage of suggestions on how this situation can be rectified.

They need to achieve greater recognition of the role they already play. Many medical secretaries already act as PA for the consultants they work for and others have developed extensive IT skills which are largely unrecognised.

When the KSF (Knowledge and Skills Framework) was introduced, many medical secretaries had high hopes. However, in all but a few isolated examples these have not materialised, with many still yet to get their first KSF review.

UNISON is lobbying hard to ensure this part of the Agenda for Change is fully implemented, with all occupations getting the opportunity to develop their role. UNISON national officer June Chandler gave a presentation to delegates on KSF. The central message was that implementation is patchy (working well in some areas and not in others), and that those who are benefiting the least (people such as medical



secretaries) are those that need it most, as they are often the last to be considered for any sort of training or development opportunities. Her message was that medical secretaries should not let the KSF pass them by, but should grab the chance to engage with it and make the most of the opportunities it can bring.

Delegates also heard a presentation by Tony Chandler, a consultant on widening participation in learning, currently working with "Skills for Health" and health trade unions. Tony emphasised the commitment to training enshrined in the NHS current constitution (dh.gov.uk/en/Healthcare/NHSConstitution/index.htm) and the training opportunities provided by AMSPAR and City and Guilds. He also gave examples of good practice including a career structure in one trust which



provides a career path from clerical assistant (Band 2) to medical secretariat management (Band 7).

Copies of both June's and Tony's presentations are available on the UNISON administrative and clerical web site at unison.org.uk/healthcare/administrative/index.asp.

To find out more about Skills for Health go to: skillsforhealth.org.uk/.

Contacts

The full-time officers supporting the Administrative and Clerical Sector are **Dave Godson** (d.godson@unison.co.uk) and **Robert Baughan** (r.baughan@unison.co.uk), who can also be contacted in the UNISON Health Group on 0207 5511418.

Keep up to date

Don't forget, you can visit the UNISON website for further information about the administrative and clerical sector at: unison.org.uk/healthcare/administrative/index.asp

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Canada to the UK

After the conference a delegate spoke of her own experience as a medical secretary working in both Canada and the United Kingdom. Rose, who works in Sussex, told delegates how medical secretaries have developed a role and career path in information management in Canada. "In Canada medical secretaries are considered a key part of the health record management team," she commented. This is very different in the UK, where the role of medical secretaries is closely linked to that of the consultant they work for.

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