



Coláiste Dhochtúiri
Teaghlaigh Éireann



Irish College of GPs

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Introduction

The Irish College of GPs is the professional body for general practice in Ireland. The College is the representative organisation for education, training, and standards in general practice and encourages the highest of standards. The College is the recognised body for the accreditation of specialist training in general practice in Ireland and is recognised by the Medical Council as the representative academic body for the specialty of general practice.

There are 4400 members and associates in the College, comprising over 85% of practicing General Practitioners (GPs) in the Republic of Ireland. In addition, there are 1120 GP trainees working in general practice on a supervised basis and who are undertaking the Irish College of GPs four-year National GP Training Programme.

Since the commencement of the International Medical Graduate Rural Programme in 2023, there are now 120 GPs completing the two-year scheme. By the end of this year, we expect to have over 200 doctors undertaking this programme.

The last four years have created a serious strain on general practice, affecting both patients and the GP community. Notwithstanding this, without general practice, the positive societal and health impacts resulting from the vaccination and boosters' programme (during and after COVID 19) would not have been possible. It is notable that 'routine' general practice continued, with routine childhood vaccines and cervical smear uptake unaffected by the pandemic, which still only started four years ago.

The delivery of healthcare is changing rapidly, partially due to new technologies, and the pressures on hospitals. Most GPs have special clinical interests (dermatology, gynaecology, musculoskeletal medicine, nursing homes etc.) and many more want to

develop sub-specialist expertise. In the future, the structure of General Practice will be built around a Primary Care Team approach i.e., GPs, nurses, a practice manager, and administrative staff, combined with allied health professionals.

General practices are coming under pressure to adapt to change, and they are flexible and open to change, and this has been very clear during the pandemic, where they were able to adapt their practices to ensure delivery of patient care.

However, there remains a significant shortage of GPs to replace those retiring and to meet population demand. That is one of the key reasons the College increased our intake of GP Trainees to 350 in 2024, with the support of the government and HSE rather than waiting until 2026 as previously planned, and we have also introduced and in tandem we continue to run the IMG Programme.

GPs and their Practice Teams are pivotal to societal wellbeing. GPs provide comprehensive whole person and continuity of care. The GP is most likely the first point of contact in matters of personal health; coordinates the care of patients and refers patients to other specialists; cares for patients of all ages and disease categories and cares for patients over a period of their lifetime. However, general practice is under serious strain and has been for some time.

GP practices are busier than ever, but less able to find replacements for retiring GPs, or new GPs to expand their practices and deal with growing workloads. Being a GP is the most wonderful professional career. However, we must resource, expand and be creative in our thinking to ensure we do not cease to be patient centred, and patient focused.

The current GMS contract and HSE structures make it difficult for establishing general practitioners to set up. The capital costs of acquiring 'bricks and mortar' are substantial

and a significant barrier to young GPs establishing practice. The challenge of becoming an employer of many practice staff is a further barrier to young GPs establishing a practice. In addition, many rural practices and inner-city practices in deprived areas are being left unfilled when the GP retires, due to the inability to recruit mainly because of a general lack of supports and incentives from the HSE. GP-led practices are at the heart of their communities, with strong local connections, and patient centred care.

Several positives have emerged from the last four years, such as availability of diagnostics, telemedicine, better organisation of our waiting rooms, electronic prescriptions and eCertification, all of which have enabled greater efficiencies in general practice. However, that face-to-face engagement with our patients is the cornerstone of general practice, valued by our patients and we cannot lose that.

In July 2024, 350 new trainees (the highest number to date) were admitted into our training programme. There are now over 1100 trainees in total in the Irish College of GPs 4-year training programme.

The Irish College of GPs are now promoting their 2025 recruitment campaign which is looking to maintain an intake of 350 per annum and continue to try and build capacity within the specialty. The early indications are that demand for our training programme remain high, but the critical point is retention and that is we retain all those who qualify after completing their training.

Both manpower projections and population growth have spurred direct action from the HSE and Department of Health to facilitate the College in increasing available post-graduate training posts within Ireland in the coming years.

This represents an acknowledgement of the significant transfer of Chronic Disease

Management from secondary hospital care to Primary General Practice care over the past number of years. It also reflects the expanded eligibility for free GP Care at point of contact.

This in turn provides a substantial response to the acknowledged difficulties patients have encountered in getting registered with local GPs in many cities, towns, and rural areas of the country. Maintaining patient access to a GP is and will continue to be central to the College's mission.

The College acknowledges and thanks the Minister of Health, HSE and Department of Health for working with the College to expand GP training and supporting our International Medical Graduate Rural GP Programme. We are also encouraged by our interactions with the Strategic Task Force on the Future of General Practice and look forward to the final report this year.

Irish General Practice Today?

General practice is:¹

- Often the patient's first point of contact with the health services. All else in the health service flows from that.
- Person-centred.
- Comprehensive care from the beginning to the end of life.
- Coordinating care between the many agencies involved in the care of complex chronic illnesses.

In this context, general practice is key to:

- Timely, equitable access to high quality care.
- Safe provision of Urgent and Acute care.

- Continuity of care.
- Local availability.
- Access to clinical knowledge and expertise.
- Generalist care.

General practice in Ireland provides professional quality care, at the heart of the local community. It is the cornerstone of the Irish health service, and GPs are the first port of call for most patients.

Unlike most other care settings in Ireland, patient notes in Irish general practice are computerised, leading to efficiencies in care provision and a strong foundation for any and all planned eHealth advances. Ensuring that these eHealth initiatives do not burden general practice is a huge task. If done well, these initiatives will harness the huge volume of work that GP teams do day-in, day-out to ensure patient records are kept up to date, thereby ensuring patients are kept as safe as possible. Done badly, these initiatives have the potential to fragment care, reduce time available for patient care, worsen burnout and frustrate general practice.

On a normal day, a GP must deal with multiple issues presented by patients, from a depressed young adult to a new-born baby, to an elderly woman with several complex needs. General practices are not all identical - they vary hugely between larger urban group practices in suburbs, smaller rural practices, and practices in deprived areas, all with a high level of complexity.

Sustainability Of the Workforce Demand

Population Growth and Aging

Ireland's population continues to grow steadily, now at almost 5.4 million², with CSO

projections indicating it will reach 6 million by 2040.³ This growth alone places pressure on our healthcare system. However, the demographic shift towards an older population is particularly significant. There are now 833k people aged 65+, representing an increase of over 150k people since 2018.³ This aging population requires more frequent and complex medical care, intensifying the demand on general practice services.

Increasing Complexity of Patient Needs

The healthcare needs of our population are increasingly complex. We see a rise in chronic conditions, often with patients managing multiple health issues. Conditions such as diabetes, heart disease, and mental health disorders require ongoing management and coordination of care. Additionally, as medical knowledge advances, there's a growing emphasis on preventive care and early intervention, and the continuous addition of new treatments - which, while beneficial in the long term, adds to the immediate workload of GPs.

Current Supply

Workforce

As of this year, we have 4,370 GPs serving our population, a modest increase from 4,250 last year.⁴ Women now comprise 54% of all GPs. The average age of our GPs is 49 years, though there's a notable gender difference – female GPs tend to be younger, with an average age of 47, as compared to 52 for their male counterparts. When it comes to practice structure, most GPs work in group practices.⁴ However, 10% operate solo practices.

Workload

A typical day for a GP starts at 8:30 AM and daytime work finishes at 6:00 PM.⁴ GPs see, on average, 25 patients a day in their practices. This means a GP working a "standard" four-day week often exceeds 40 hours, above or comparable to full-time equivalents in

other industries.⁵

Collectively, Irish GPs conduct 21 million daytime consultations annually and more than 1 million out-of-hours consultations.⁶ Since the COVID-19 pandemic, many patients also request telephone consultations on top of this face-to-face workload. Additionally, for every two hours of clinical work, an additional hour of administrative and follow-up work is typically required.⁴

Distribution

To better understand where patients are experiencing issues with access to GP services, understanding the geographic distribution of our GP workforce is crucial. The Irish College of GPs currently tracks GP supply at county level, benchmarking against Medical Council data, and are planning more granular analyses that will help us better understand GP supply in relation to rurality and local needs.⁷

Supply Outlook

Recruitment Trends

The future of general practice in Ireland seems promising as far as recruitment to GP specialist training is concerned. In 2024, we welcomed 350 new GP trainees, contributing to a 68% increase in trainees since 2020.⁸ This growth in training capacity is a positive step towards addressing future GP needs, though tracking retention remains challenging.

Working Patterns

Irish GPs staff over 30,000 clinical sessions per week, with the median GP working 8 sessions weekly.⁴ Understanding more about the issues covered in consultations and the length of consultations is a key research priority for our college.

Many GPs also contribute beyond clinical practice:

- 20% involved in education/training
- 8% work in other medical settings
- 4% in research/academia ⁴

This diversity of roles enriches the profession but impacts clinical availability. Balancing clinical sessions, other professional activities, and work-life balance is crucial, especially given existing supply constraints.

Retirement Outlook

The age profile of our GP workforce presents significant challenges:

- Nearly one-fifth of GPs are over 60, likely to retire within a decade
- 12% are over 65, potentially retiring within five years
- 5% are over 70, which demonstrates a reliance on GPs who, in other industries, would be retired ⁴

The retirement outlook, changing work patterns, and increasing demand for GP services highlight the critical importance of recruitment and retention efforts. Balancing these factors is crucial for ensuring a sustainable and effective GP workforce for Ireland's future healthcare needs.

Implications and Challenges

Workforce Sustainability: Balancing growing demand and retirement rates with new GP recruitment is crucial. We must address work-life balance concerns to retain GPs, ensure equitable distribution across urban and rural areas, and adapt to modern GPs' changing work preferences.

Access to Care: Increasing demand may lead to longer wait times. Geographical disparities

in GP availability persist. Providing comprehensive care for complex conditions within primary care constraints is challenging. We must balance urgent care needs with preventive and long-term care strategies.

Quality of Care: Maintaining high care standards under increasing workload pressures is essential. GPs need time for clinical follow-up and continuous professional development. We must consider the impact on consultation times and patient satisfaction while supporting GPs in managing increasingly complex patient needs.

Research and Data Needs

Key Research Priorities:

- GP career trajectories and retention
- Workload analysis and time allocation
- Showcasing benefits of GP electronic medical record data for research
- Patient access, preferences and experiences in primary care
- Promote data sharing among key healthcare organizations

Key Recommendations

1. Resourcing Rural General Practice to attract GPs

There is growing concern, particularly in rural Ireland, at the continued decline in GPs working in small communities. Newly trained GPs do not find rural practice attractive – and yet there are patients who require a GP in these areas. Therefore, innovative ways must be resourced to attract GPs to replace those GPs rapidly approaching retirement. These include consolidation of smaller practices in rural areas, satellite practices, built infrastructure, rural practice supports and incentives and where appropriate, and with appropriate controls in place, the use consultations.

The College welcomes the support it is receiving with the IMG Rural Programme as most of those who come through this system will be placed in Rural Areas. However, to ensure they stay and long-term sustainability, other supports as mentioned above will need to be put in place.

2. Suitable premises need to be provided for GPs and their teams

As GP- led primary care develops further, the demand for suitable premises will increase. Imaginative arrangements with leases and ownership need to be explored and delivered and lack of same is a deterrent to young GPs setting up in Practice.

The built infrastructure is increasingly perceived as an unwanted, unnecessary, and unwarranted liability by potential GPs. Society does not require other healthcare workers to provide the work premises. The ‘bricks and mortar’ is now a barrier to recruitment, retention, mobility, and retirement. This is especially the case in affluent urban areas where property and rents are unaffordable for young GPs. The Scottish government and NHS Scotland have addressed this challenge, to incrementally reduce the built infrastructure risk burden on GPs.⁹ Ireland urgently needs multiple innovative approaches to GP built infrastructure.

The HSE can support younger GPs establish practice by providing purpose-built GP premises, thereby avoiding substantial capital expenditure on ‘bricks and mortar’. This ‘built infrastructure’ approach will support young establishing GPs, support relocation of overseas GPs to Ireland, and the amalgamation of smaller GP practices. This may include a variety of options, including interest free loans, HSE provided and HSE leased premises.

Expansion of the GP healthcare team, especially nurses, will require substantially more clinical space. Incentives to support an expanded GP team must address the built infrastructure requirements.

3. GP Led multidisciplinary teams

We need to further develop the multidisciplinary Primary Care teams (nurses, pharmacists, phlebotomists, healthcare assistants, etc.) within general practice. The HSE "Enhanced Community Care" initiative is an excellent development, and it is hoped that this will incrementally support GPs and our patients in timely access to clinical expertise, diagnostics, and therapies. It is important that expansion in both areas is conducted simultaneously.

With increased urbanisation and the growth in the size of general practices, we need to recognize the importance of management and administrative support to enable GPs to do their work efficiently.

In that respect we need:

- a. GP Managers for bigger teams, with HR support.
- b. Group Practice consolidation.
- c. Practices that enable GPs to specialise and pursue a portfolio career.
- d. Greater role for nurses in general practice i.e., a rapid increase in Practice Nurses, advanced nurse practitioners, nurse prescribers etc.
- e. Increased use of phlebotomists, healthcare assistants and pharmacists.

These initiatives will rapidly liberate GP time to address patient complexity and multimorbidity.

The College would like to see the HSE facilitating the support of:

- a. GP training in business planning and management.
- b. GP training in setting up and building group practices at community level.
- c. Where group practice is not viable or feasible, the HSE also need to facilitate the ongoing support of such practices, enhancing practice collaboration and networking.

The financial and planning resources needed to develop big practices are significant. The DOH/HSE must move away from seeing GPs solely as contracted providers to meaningful engagement with us as genuine partners in health care.

We have stated previously that if our vision is GPs as the leaders in delivering health in the community, we must engage and collaborate more. For example, the DOH could work with the European Investment Bank to set up a fund to provide low interest loans to groups of GPs to set up primary care centres run by those GPs. Not only could this fund work for larger practices but it could also be used to micro-fund small, even single-handed practices where there is an urgent need particularly in rural general practice and in inner city deprived areas. There is significant planning required at all levels for a substantial project like this alone.

4. The current number of approximately two thousand General Practice Nurses (GPNs) needs to be doubled at a minimum.

We need substantially more general practice nurses, with resourcing and supports comparable to secondary care nurses. The College have been working with our colleagues in the Irish General Practice Nurses Educational Association (IGPNEA) for a number of years to deliver high-quality education to train general practice nurses at

Third Level. We welcome the start of the Graduate Diploma in Primary Care Nursing Practice in University College Dublin in 2023, and this programme has proven to be very successful with high demand. However, we need to see the expansion of this and similar programmes to other Third Level institutions and assistance in respect of fees for Practice Nurses.

General practice nurses are skilled autonomous clinicians with a broad clinical expertise. The College has long advocated for a substantial increase in the number of GPNs.¹⁰⁻¹² As it stands there are approximately 2000 GPNs in Ireland¹³ making up about 45% of clinicians in general practice. Both their practices and the GPNs themselves have embraced enhanced roles but have legitimate concerns about the training, funding, and indemnity for such development.¹⁴

A recent Canadian systematic review of the impact of nurses in primary care concluded that they have a role in medication management, patient triage, chronic disease management, sexual health, routine preventative care, health promotion/education, and self-management interventions (e.g., smoking cessation support).¹⁵

GPNs are central to the vision GPs have for the development of general practice. There is the potential for career development for GPNs as some will want to become advanced nurse practitioners, nurse prescribers, or clinical nurse specialists to support chronic disease management and triage minor illness. To achieve this requires investment, training, and support.¹⁵ To allow GPNs to practice to their highest levels, it is important that tasks that they currently do are devolved to another member of the team. Taking bloods, ECGs, spirometry, fitting 24-hour blood pressure monitors can all be done by a practice technician/phlebotomist. This presents an opportunity for a 'quick win' at relatively modest cost. Similarly, for GPNs, there are insufficient courses available to train suitable candidates.

Much needs to be done to attract greater numbers into this specialty.

5. Access to Mental Health Services.

GPs manage the majority of mental health complaints in the Irish state, such as addiction, anxiety, and depression. There is a severe shortage of primary care psychological services in particular; this is curtailing effective management of these mental health conditions. We are beyond crisis point at this stage. It is critical and must be a budgetary priority that additional resources are applied to general practices to enable sessional psychological and counselling services to be financed. The College recommends an increase in the number of allied primary care professionals, including psychologists, community psychiatric nurses and mental health therapists.

There remains a high level of frustration expressed by GPs in their inability to provide the appropriate care for highly vulnerable patients is a damning indictment on Irish society. Appropriate and tailored funding for mental health can wait no longer. The challenges around timely equitable access to a well-resourced CAMHS are well documented. Mental Health supports must be given prioritisation in this year's budget.

6. To encourage more graduates to enter the specialty of general practice, medical schools need to increase the exposure time to general practice within the medical curriculum.

Not enough graduates of Irish medical schools select general practice as a career, leaving our long-term workforce planning in a highly vulnerable position. We need to adopt strategies similar to many other countries which have robustly engaged with the

medical schools and successfully increased student selection of general practice careers.

We must build a diverse and inclusive workforce that is representative of the communities we wish to serve, underpinned by the principles of social accountability while being committed to gender equality and social inclusion and social justice.

Building on established international examples, and rigorous research evidence, we recommend focusing existing undergraduate medical programmes to producing graduates who select a career in general practice. The Scottish government “SCOTGem” model is one exemplar.¹⁶

The length and quality of general practice experience at medical school is accepted as a key positive factor in promoting general practice as a career.¹⁷ Exposure to general practice as part of the formal, informal, and hidden curriculum, positive experiences and role models in general practice have all been identified as contribution factors in young doctors choosing to undertake higher education in general practice.^{18, 19}

The international literature is very clear that resourcing longitudinal placements in general practice is a key and essential first step in the GP workforce ‘Pipeline’.²⁰ This should include a curriculum consisting of a minimum of 25% of GP placements. The recently opened Ulster University provides 30% of all teaching in general practice, commencing in the first week of medical school.

Ireland with the notable exception of the University of Limerick at 25%, has very limited exposure to clinical general practice. To increase the general practice curricular footprint to international norms, will require increased funding to support both general practice placements and general practice university academic staff. An anomaly currently exists where the terms and conditions of clinical academic general practice

staff are not the same as those of other equivalent clinical staff in other university disciplines. This is a key deterrent to both attracting and retaining senior academic general practice staff who will be essential to lead and support such radical curricular change.

A specific rural curriculum and pathway should exist within undergraduate medical education and GP training. Rural students and GP trainers /mentors should be recruited and retained with exposure to rural practice maximised. This will also support the development of hospital physicians who wish to practice in rural regions.

GP Intern places need to be sufficiently expanded and resourced to continue the 'Pipeline' into postgraduate GP training. To meet the expansion of training across all specialties and to meet the chronic shortage of doctors both in every area of healthcare delivery, we need a radical overhaul of numbers entering undergraduate and graduate medicine. In addition, on completion of GP training, an average number of postgraduate general practice academic fellowships, with some dedicated to rural practice, needs to be established. These fellowships, funded by the National Doctors Training and Planning (NDTP) and the Health Service Executive (HSE) should form another step in this general practice career 'pipeline'.^{19, 20}

Conclusion

Irish general practice is changing rapidly and has changed beyond recognition in the last four years. General practice has also shown how flexible and adaptable it is to meet urgent needs. However, there are huge pressures on existing GP practices, and general practice must be supported and resourced to retain existing doctors and recruit new GPs into practice. At the moment, general practice is working efficiently, flexibly in a patient-centred way, based in the heart of the community, but is at breaking point.

Over the next two decades, huge changes are coming, and the Department of Health, HSE IMO and the Irish College of GPs must intensively collaborate to develop a policy that protects and grows general practice in the interest of patient care. We have seen progress through collaboration and engagement, and it is important this continues and is fast tracked.

The College also looks forward to the publication of the report from the Strategic Task Force on General Practice and we hope it will provide a direction with purpose for our specialty over the next decade and beyond.

We need

1. Resource Rural General Practice to attract GPs.
2. Provide suitable premises for GPs and their teams.
3. Facilitate and fund the development of GP Led Multidisciplinary Teams.
4. Increase the number of General Practice Nurses.
5. Enable greater access to Mental Health Services as a matter of urgency.
6. Invest in Undergraduate Medical Education to increase the exposure time to general practice.

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