

Unit Two

Good employment practice from an HCA's perspective

Key messages

Reading this unit will:

- introduce you to the role of the health care assistant (HCA) in primary care
- help you to think about whether you would be interested in becoming an HCA
- tell you where to get started in looking for a job as an HCA
- prepare you for the application, interview and induction process
- tell you what to expect from a good employer.

Throughout this unit you will find links to tools and resources to help you achieve a role in general practice.

This is an exciting time to be an HCA in the NHS. The way in which NHS services are provided to patients is changing. In the future more of the services that are provided in hospital (often referred to as secondary care) will be provided in our local communities by local practices and other local clinics (often referred to as primary care).

The range of tasks undertaken by HCAs varies from practice to practice. A recent review of training programmes for HCAs provides some idea of the scope of the HCA's role in general practice.

The Potential Range of HCA Duties in General Practice

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|------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|
| • New patient registration | • Peak-flow measurement | • Infection control |
| • Blood pressure checks | • Spirometry | • Health checks |
| • Urinalysis | • Audiometry | • Summarising patient records |
| • Height/weight/BMI | • Smoking cessation | • Act as chaperone |
| • Ordering supplies/stock control | • Restocking of clinical area | • Helicobacter testing |
| • Cleaning sterilisation equipment | • Health promotion | • Patient recall |
| • Phlebotomy/venopuncture | • Supporting practice nurse triage | • Helping with specific long-term conditions, eg diabetes, asthma |
| • Ordering vaccines | • Minor-illness clinics | |
| • ECG recording | • Assist in minor operations | |

By delegating tasks like these to trained HCAs nurses can take on more work and so free up time for doctors to look after patients with more complicated problems.

Being an HCA in general practice is very rewarding because you will meet all kinds of people from babies and young children to older people, and you will be working closely with colleagues as part of an integrated clinical team.

Working in general practice

“

I enjoy working in primary care; it's much nicer than working in a hospital. I can get to know the patients and I get to see them more than once.
(Health Care Assistant)

”

If you want to work in general practice you will want to know the best way of finding the right job for you. When advertising the post of HCA the practice will have already thought about the role they would like a new HCA to undertake. They will have considered the personal qualities they might expect that person to have to help support the existing nursing team and the needs of their patients.

Where to look for a job

There are a number of places locally that a general practice might choose to advertise for an HCA and good places to look might include:

- **The internet** – for example www.thisisstaffordshire.co.uk has a section for people who are looking for new career opportunities. There are a variety of such sites for people searching for employment.
- **NHS jobs** (www.nhs.jobs.uk) – the HR department of the PCT will be able to assist in posting jobs on this website.
- **JobCentre Plus** – see www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk and [Tool - JobCentre Plus vacancy details](#). Over 50,000 NHS vacancies are advertised with JobCentre Plus every year.
- **Word of mouth** – people often stay longer if recruited this way.
- **Local newspapers** – this is often the most effective way of reaching the local population. However, it can be costly.
- **Internal applications** – you may already be working in general practice, for example as a receptionist moving into a new role. You will be familiar with the practice and this can help you to become effective more quickly. If you are to be employed in a dual role (receptionist/HCA), it is important you have some way of showing which particular job you are doing, eg a uniform when undertaking the role of an HCA and a name badge for each role.

The place you would like to work

You will need to think about the place you would like to work. It is not just about pay, and terms and conditions, but also:

- *what the people are like*
- *if there is a desk or space for your personal items*
- *if there is a uniform to wear*
- *if the staff are treated with respect*
- *whether human resource policies and procedures are in place to ensure that you are dealt with fairly.*

In addition, the opportunity to learn and develop both personally and professionally can be an important reason for joining a particular practice.

Example: JobCentre Plus

There has never been a better time to join the NHS. It is committed to improving the working lives of staff by creating a well-managed, flexible working environment that offers staff improved pay, career development opportunities and an excellent benefits package.

Jobcentre Plus is a service provided to you free of charge.

Vacancies are immediately available on their website, which is Europe's leading recruitment site and receives 1.2 million hits per week.

Please feel free to contact your local Jobcentre and discuss your recruitment needs. Your local job centre can be established by accessing the website www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk/employers.

This site also gives you access to information regarding their services and links to other key sites.

Online

JobCentre Plus handles over 12,000 new vacancies a day, these can all be accessed on-line at www.jobcentreplus.gov.uk.

Vacancies and training opportunities can also be accessed at www.worktrain.gov.uk.

JobCentre Plus Offices

There are 1,000 Jobcentre and JobCentre Plus offices across the country with advisers on hand to promote job opportunities.

Job Points

Vacancies can be accessed on the 8,600 touch-screen Job Point terminals available in JobCentre Plus offices and outreach centres such as supermarkets.

By Phone

JobCentre Plus Direct has access to all JobCentre Plus vacancies. They can be contacted on 0845 6060 234 between 08:00 – 18:00 Monday to Friday and 09:00 – 13:00 on Saturdays. A text phone service is available for the hard of hearing on 0845 6055 255.

Specialist Advisers

JobCentre Plus has advisers specialised in helping people in receipt of benefits. These advisers are based in JobCentre Plus offices.

Should you wish to place a vacancy the [Tool - JobCentre Plus vacancy details](#) can be used to either fax email or telephone your vacancy details.

Applying for an HCA post

Having found a post and satisfied yourself that it is one you really want, it is a good idea to make an appointment with the practice manager to undertake an informal visit and see whether the atmosphere and facilities of the practice suit you. Alternatively, you may already be employed in a practice in another capacity, eg as a receptionist, and know how the practice works.

Be aware that general practices vary tremendously from large partnerships in medical centres with 10 or 12 GPs who may have a team of GPNs and HCAs, to single-handed practices where you are likely to be the only HCA working with a practice nurse.

Different working environments will suit different people and personalities so it is important to consider what you want.

Unit 6: Career planning and development for health care assistants contains some tools you might want to complete to see what type of role might suit you best.

Once you have found an HCA role you are interested in, you will then need to ask for an application pack. The advert should tell you how to apply for a pack, which should include the following items:

- an application form
- a job description and duties
- a person specification
- terms and conditions of employment
- information about the practice and team
- a date for interviews.

Completing the application form

You will be asked to complete an application form and this should clearly demonstrate the skills that you can bring to this post. **It is important to think carefully** (see [Tool - Application for employment](#)) **about what you are going to write in your application.** An application form checklist might help you. (see [Tool - How to complete an application form](#)). If you are in receipt of benefits, JobCentre Plus can offer you support with applying for a job. Useful information is also available at www.jobseekersdirect.co.uk

Job description and duties

This will describe the role of the HCA and the purpose of the job. You will need to read the job description carefully to ensure that it is the right job for you as the role will differ between practices. Some might have a dual role, eg receptionist and HCA, while others might require you to be trained in certain skills that are needed within that practice, eg spirometry.

To get a better idea of what to expect from a job description, see [Tool - Job description for health care assistants \(basic\)](#).

As an HCA, you will be delegated duties by a registered nurse who is accountable under their professional code of conduct for ensuring that you are competent to undertake a task. See *Unit 7: Integration of health care assistants in the general practice workforce* to find out more about accountability and delegation.

There may be some practices where the GP employs an HCA and does not have a general practice nurse working in the practice. It is essential that as an HCA you have the support and mentorship of a practice nurse who works with you and delegates tasks to you.

If you are employed in a practice without a practice nurse, you will need to investigate ways of gaining that support. You might like to look at support information (www.wipp.nhs.uk/43.php) for ideas on

The job description should be reviewed each year at your annual appraisal (see *Unit 4: Personal and professional development of health care assistants*). As you and the practice develop, the HCA role may change according to the needs of the practice. This, however, cannot be done without negotiation or agreement with you.

how you might be able to link with general practice nurses or HCAs in other practices.

A person specification

Alongside the job description will be a person specification (see [Tool - Person specification form template](#)). This will relay the kind of personal qualities that are needed for the job, eg good communication skills and the ability to work as part of a team. Looking at some real-life examples of person specifications linked to job descriptions will help you to decide if you are suited to a post (see [Tool - Job description for a healthcare assistant \(basic\)](#)).

Terms and conditions

In addition to the job description and person specification, you will be given the terms and conditions of employment. Although you might be able to negotiate some changes before you sign the contract of employment, these terms and conditions, eg hours of work, pay and holiday entitlement, will become legally binding once both parties have signed the document. For an example of what to expect see [Tool - Contract of employment](#).

Your contract should be given to you within 2 months of you starting work for the practice. Keep it in a safe place. This could be included in your personal development portfolio folder, as it is sometimes useful to refer to the job description when considering your performance over the past year at a review.

Some HCAs may be employed by PCTs, but more and more HCAs are now employed directly by the GP practice. As an employer, the practice can set their own pay levels. The NHS is currently introducing *Agenda for Change*.² This is a new pay package that aims to give equal pay for work of equal value. It will replace the current clinical grading in the Whitley Council Rules. If you work for the NHS you will have to move onto the *Agenda for Change* pay scales, but in general practice it is voluntary. The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) strongly believes that nurses and HCAs employed in general practice should be employed on *Agenda for Change* terms and conditions² and the *new General Medical Services (nGMS) contract* encourages this practice.³ *Agenda for Change* links to the *NHS Knowledge and Skills Framework*, which outlines the competencies required for various roles. See [Unit 3: Competences](#) for more information.

For more information about *Agenda for Change*, look at the information booklet *Agenda for Change: What Will it Mean for You*.⁴

Information about the practice and team

This could be the practice booklet, or that which describes the services offered and a little about the people who work there.

A date for interviews

This is good employment practice. It gives you the opportunity to make sure you do not book any other appointments on that day until you have heard if you are to be invited to interview.

Short-listing

Once the closing date has passed, the employer will look at each of the application forms to decide who will be invited to interview.

If you have been selected, you should be sent a letter telling you:

- *the time*
- *the place*
- *anything you should bring with you, eg personal identification*
- *instructions about any tasks you may be asked to do at the interview.*

When you receive the letter, you may be asked to confirm with the practice that you will be going to the interview. Don't forget to do this!

Interview

Remember that interviews are a two-way-process. It is not only an opportunity for the practice to assess what you can bring to the job, but also an opportunity for you to see if you would like to take the job if it is offered.

When you arrive for your interview, go straight to the receptionist to let them know you are there. They will usually ask you to wait a short while until the people who are interviewing are ready for you. These people are called the interview panel.

The interview panel will want to:

- *find the right person to do the job*
- *create a good image of the practice*
- *sell the job to the right person*
- *be fair to all applicants.*

You will want to:

- *understand the job and the practice*
- *be offered the post*
- *do your best*
- *create a good impression.*

There are usually at least two people on the panel to ensure fairness. You might want to look at the tips and hints for interview tool to help you on the day (see [Tool - Tips and hints for interview](#)).

On successful offer of employment

Once all the interviews have been completed and a decision has been reached by the panel, they will contact you to let you know if you have been successful.

If you are successful then you will receive a letter offering you the job subject to satisfactory references being received and:

- *confirmation of identity – eg passport, utility bills, marriage certificate (for women)*
- *a check of any relevant certificates/qualifications, including birth certificate*
- *a Criminal Records Bureau check (see www.crb.gov.uk for more information).*

Once these checks have been completed, a starting date can be agreed.

If you have not been successful on this occasion, it might be a good opportunity to ask the practice for some feedback. This will help you to prepare for the next interview you attend.

Induction

Everyone has a different experience of induction when joining a new employer. Induction is your introduction to the practice. Hopefully, it will be more than just a warm welcome and where to put your coat; although these things are important.

There are two key areas that you should look for, which are detailed below.

1. Role information

Your induction will help you to get to know all about your new role and your responsibilities, including health and safety, and what will be expected from you on a day-to-day basis. Is there an induction booklet with a plan for your first month? Has any training or development been organised for you? No-one will expect you to know everything when you start. However, they will expect you to be honest about your capabilities and you should be willing to learn. They will also check your competences to ensure the best service is delivered to patients.

See [Tool - Health care assistant induction timetable](#) for an idea of the kind of things that you could expect to do when you start your new role.

You might also be given an induction pack (see [Tool - Induction pack](#)), which will help you to find things out about the practice and plan your progress during the first few weeks.

2. Support Information

Getting to know the characters and working styles of the new team is very important. How do you address people eg Dr Brown or Jane? Who can you have lunch with? It takes time to get to know people, but remember the practice chose you and will want you to feel happy and comfortable in your role. It is good practice to provide a new member of staff with a 'buddy' or 'mentor' in the first few months of employment to help you to play an effective and safe role in the practice. This could be another HCA. However, if you are the only HCA in the practice you might like to find someone outside the practice to buddy-up with or liaise with a practice nurse. Find out if there is there a HCA forum/ support group in your area. The practice nurse or practice manager will be able to help find out for you. This is where HCAs meet, eg once a month to discuss their roles and access training. HCAs are still a new model in general practice and sharing information about what you do in your practice with others will help the role to grow and develop. When you join the practice you will usually be supervised by a practice nurse who will delegate tasks to you and will be there to support and guide you in your work. Delegation and accountability are discussed in more detail in [Unit 7: Integration of Health Care Assistants in the General Practice Workforce](#).

Example: Richmond and Twickenham PCT HCA forum

Richmond and Twickenham PCT has set up an HCA forum where HCAs from general practice can meet to talk about their jobs and what happens in the different practices. It has given them a voice for putting forward their views on lots of different subjects, eg uniforms for HCAs. Now, HCAs keep in touch outside the meetings. They help each other in a variety of ways, such as how to use particular pieces of equipment or new patient procedures. It also raises awareness about training and gives the HCAs a point of contact for support, if needed.

You may also be offered a career mentor. This is someone who helps you to take a look at yourself, test out ideas and raise questions in a supportive, confidential way. This is discussed in more detail in [Unit 5: Education and training](#) and [Unit 6: Career planning and development for health care assistants](#).

Clinical supervision is '... a formal process of professional support and learning which enables individual practitioners to develop knowledge and competence, assume responsibility for their own practice, and enhance consumer protection and safety of care in complex situations.'⁵

Clinical supervision

This should give you the chance to take time out of your daily routine, usually with a more experienced member of the team, on a confidential basis, to reflect on the way you do things. It is usually associated with registered nurses, but as the role of the HCA grows and changes, it is important that you are included in the clinical supervision process.

Clinical supervision is strongly recommended as good practice and differs depending on where you work. It could be undertaken as:

- a one-to-one session with your nurse mentor or an experienced HCA to reflect on your practice
- as a group with other HCAs led by a more experienced HCA within your practice
- as part of the HCA forum meetings across the PCT.

Staff at your practice should be very supportive, but if they have never had an HCA before they might not know exactly what to expect either. If you are unsure about team working then look at Unit 7 on how HCAs integrate into the practice team for some tips and hints (see **Unit 7: Integration of health care assistants in the general practice workforce**). Clinical supervision is discussed in more detail in **Unit 5: Education and training** and **Tool - Supervision for health care assistants**.

Trade union membership

Trade unions will be able to give you support and information about a number of issues, including employment. There are a number of different unions, eg The Royal College of Nursing (RCN, see: www.rcn.org.uk) and Unison (www.unison.org.uk). Have a look at the websites and request a membership pack to find out more.

Organisational information

Getting to know the culture and the key goals of the practice will help you to understand why things are done in a certain way. Hopefully, your induction will have given you a little information about the history of the practice and the way things work, but if not then it could be just the thing to discuss to break the ice.

Questions you might like to ask the team are:

- if there are any part time or temporary staff and your interaction with them
- the structure and history of the practice partners
- taking annual leave
- health & safety induction, eg fire exits and what to do in the event of a fire.

Review of progress

Once you have started your new role, you should have regular contact with a practice nurse who will support you as you gain in confidence. In addition, it is good employment practice to arrange regular meetings to discuss how things are going. This could be with the practice nurse or practice manager, and gives you the opportunity to raise any questions you might have and to discuss your progress. You could also keep a reflective diary in which you note your thoughts or any questions. This will help you to see how your confidence grows over time.

Summary

- *HCA's play an important role in the development of local NHS services helping nurses and doctors to make better use of their time by taking on some less complex but important tasks*
- *Most HCA's in primary care are employed by GP practices, although some may be employed by your local NHS (PCTs)*
- *As an HCA you will usually work under the supervision of a nurse working in the practice and most of your work will involve direct patient contact*
- *If you think that being an HCA is for you then you need think carefully about the kind of organisation you want to work for (small or large) and the kind of role you want to play (HCA only or a mixture of HCA and receptionist)*
- *This unit tells you where to find vacancies for HCA posts, what to expect from the recruitment process, how the practice will introduce you to your role and the things you should look for from a good employer.*

References

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