



RCP Cymru Wales SAS network spring meeting 2023

On 8 March 2023, the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) hosted the spring 2023 meeting of the Welsh specialty and specialist (SAS) doctor network, which was chaired by Dr Olwen Williams, RCP vice president for Wales. SAS advocates and tutors are invited from all health boards, as well as doctors across Wales who have signed up to the network. All SAS doctors are welcome – from any college, specialty or career stage.

Summary of the spring 2023 meeting

Since we first established the network we have produced two papers: [A positive career choice: supporting SAS doctors in Wales](#) and [A positive career choice: 6 months on](#) as well as hosting three online meetings in which SAS doctors have been able to share information, build networks and seek advice from their peers. The response has been hugely enthusiastic with very positive feedback.

During our spring meeting on 8 March, Dr Naeem Aziz, [SAS advocate](#) for Aneurin Bevan University Health Board talked to the group about the increasing number of doctors who are making an active choice to leave the traditional training pathway and become a speciality or specialist doctor.

‘I have worked as an SAS doctor for almost two decades, and I am now the SAS advocate in my health board which employs around 170 SAS doctors. There are some who are planning to apply for the certificate of eligibility for specialist registration (CESR), perhaps because they joined the NHS from overseas and did not go through the UK medical training system but would still like one day to become a consultant. And there are others who have made the active decision to pursue an SAS career. That was, for example, my own personal choice.

‘However, there is no standard way to recognise an SAS doctor’s expertise as an autonomous practitioner. It’s up to individual hospital departments to decide how to recognise the skills of a speciality or specialist doctor with no formal guidance in place. When I became an associate specialist, nothing really changed.

‘When we talk about recognising the experience and talent of an SAS doctor, we tend to talk about the CESR process, which means leaving an SAS role to become a consultant. Instead, we need a system that truly recognises and supports career development for an SAS doctor without requiring them to become a consultant as the end goal. Royal colleges can play a huge role in this by supporting health boards and trusts to develop a career pathway for specialist doctors which includes an autonomous working policy that can be adapted for use across the NHS.

‘For the past five years, I have been an acting consultant, with the patient caseload and senior management roles to match. I’m leading service transformation. But as an SAS doctor, none of this is recognised. Contract negotiations focus on salary alone, not career progression.’

The RCP vice president for Wales agreed to raise this at the next council meeting of the Welsh Academy of Medical Royal Colleges in June 2023.

There was a brief discussion about also ensuring locally employed doctors are supported before Dr Aziz raised the potential difficulties faced by SAS doctors who want to move between health boards. SAS roles are often created specifically by an employer organisation, and it can be problematic to prove an individual’s expertise and experience if/when they want to change jobs. Royal colleges should consider developing guidance on how SAS members and fellows can demonstrate their experience and knowledge.

However, some SAS doctors do not want the responsibilities that come with being a consultant and may feel uncomfortable taking on this role, especially when they are not paid a consultant’s salary. (There are plenty of examples of SAS doctors taking on very senior leadership roles without the pay, recognition or privileges of a consultant because they don’t have CESR.) Dr Aziz was keen to stress that it should be the individual’s choice, and nobody should feel pressured to work autonomously.

Health Education and Improvement Wales (HEIW) was praised for its engagement with SAS doctors, with frequent communications, learning opportunities and national meetings offered. Where they had wanted to become educational supervisors, they had been well supported to do so. In fact, despite being well qualified to supervise trainees, we heard that SAS doctors often struggle to fit teaching into their workload, especially if they are expected to cover for consultant colleagues.

Dr Hilary Williams, regional adviser for south Wales central and vice president elect suggested that SAS doctors might want to look into [job crafting](#) to explore what motivates them ahead of their next job planning session. Colleagues were also advised to keep a diary of what they do and use this along with their appraisal portfolio to inform the job planning process.

Vacancy: RCP SAS lead for Wales

The RCP SAS committee lead for Wales, Dr Jacob Daniel recently stepped down. The college will shortly be seeking expressions of interest for a new SAS representative for Wales who will sit on the RCP Cymru Wales executive committee as well as representing Wales on the [UK-wide RCP SAS committee](#). The new SAS Wales lead will inform SAS strategic activity in Wales, contribute to local medical education and conference planning, and advocate on behalf of SAS doctors with external stakeholders and the media. [Please do get in touch](#) with the team in Wales if you are interested in becoming more involved.

Bedtime reading: The solution to the NHS workforce crisis?

[The NHS workforce crisis could be solved by reforming medical training](#)

The New Statesman

‘The traditional training path has benefits but it’s clear that the number of training places is not sufficient, despite pleas to increase them. We have become fixated on trying to “fix” the traditional route, while

ignoring another solution right in front of our eyes. This involves another group of doctors who provide critical services alongside consultants – specialty and specialist (SAS) doctors, who have at least four years of postgraduate training ... We urgently need to unleash the potential of these thousands of experienced, valuable and actively working doctors in the UK. The most senior ones are vastly experienced, and the generic grade of specialty doctor given to many of them does not reflect their skills. Indeed, a new specialist-grade contract which replaced an older associate specialist contract is now live. More widespread use of this grade would support our most experienced non-consultant SAS doctors to be better remunerated, valued and become more active members of the senior medical workforce by complementing consultants.'

[An engaged and empowered SAS workforce will provide vital capacity in the current workforce crisis](#)

The BMJ

'We have SAS leaders in national positions, but it does not necessarily translate to local level leadership ... It is now of utmost importance to start national networks and collaborations towards implementing [royal college recommendations]. We begin with small steps, relevant conversations, and engagement with not just SAS groups, but also leaders in the NHS and regulators. We need to identify best practices and role models and learn from them to tackle challenges and gaps and monitor progress and outcomes. An engaged and empowered SAS workforce will improve patient safety and care, provide vital capacity in the current workforce crisis, and will be pivotal to the future shaping of the NHS.'

Next steps and actions

The RCP is working with Cardiff University School of Medicine to develop an SAS-focused piece of work linked to the [SAS doctor strategy 2022–24](#) which is being led by [Dr Jamie Read, RCP SAS lead](#).

- > We will invite the GMC, HEIW and British Medical Association (BMA) Cymru Wales to meet with the RCP Cymru Wales SAS network during 2023.
- > We will work with other royal colleges to develop joint messages on supporting SAS doctors.
- > We will write to all NHS Wales medical directors to ask what progress they have made on implementing the SAS charter and meeting the recommendations of the RCP Cymru Wales report, [A positive career choice: supporting SAS doctors in Wales](#).
- > We will ask the Welsh Academy of Medical Royal Colleges to invite an SAS speaker to talk to a Council meeting about the role and potential of SAS doctors.

For more information:

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