How physicians can influence the commissioning system: a guide to getting involved

This practical guide is designed to help make sense of the different ways that physicians can influence the planning and commissioning of patient care. It aims to help physicians to get involved in shaping the way patient care is designed and delivered locally, regionally and nationally.
Physicians can play a unique role in influencing the way that patient care is planned and provided. They can offer front-line insights into the realities of patient care. They can be powerful advocates on behalf of patients and the public. As clinical leaders, they can work across organisational and professional boundaries to help improve the way that the NHS commissions care.

Many physicians have told us that they have concerns about some aspects of commissioning and related issues such as tendering, contracting, clinical coding and payment systems. Many physicians have also been working to address these challenges and improve patient care. This practical guide considers some of the ways physicians can influence the way services are planned and commissioned in England.

Local opportunities

Govern how local health services are commissioned

Clinical commissioning groups (CCGs): these local bodies are responsible for commissioning most secondary care healthcare services in a local area, including urgent and emergency care. CCGs are clinically led and their governing body membership must include at least one secondary care doctor. This is a highly varied role that can encompass responsibilities ranging from audit to integration and quality improvement. However, the role is shaped locally; it gives physicians the opportunity to shape local secondary care and, as more CCGs start to collaboratively commission GP services, to shape primary care too.

> To find out more, see Collaboration in clinical leadership, the Royal College of Physicians’ (RCP’s) joint report with NHS clinical commissioners on the role of secondary care doctors on CCG governing bodies. To find out how to join a CCG governing body, visit the websites of CCGs that you would be interested to work with (which must not be in the same area as your main NHS clinical practice).

Shape the entire local health and social care landscape

Health and wellbeing boards (HWBs): these committees bring together the key partners involved in health and social care commissioning in each local area. Their membership includes local politicians, healthcare commissioners, directors of social care and patient advocacy groups. Physicians can influence HWBs directly through trust chief executives, most of whom will have strong connections with their local HWBs. All HWBs hold their meetings in public, offering an excellent opportunity for physicians to get involved in shaping the entire local health economy and the wellbeing of the whole local population.

> To find out more about HWBs visit the Local Government Association’s website. To find out how you can attend your local HWB meeting, visit your local authority’s website to find details of future meetings.

Plan and lead whole areas of clinical practice

Medical and clinical directors: these senior clinical roles involve coordinating whole areas of patient care in a provider trust. It is important to remember that these key senior leadership roles can serve as a much-needed link between clinicians and those who plan and commission services. They can play a vital role in reaching out to NHS managers and local commissioners to shape the future of local health services and to solve local challenges.

> To find out more, speak to your own medical director and clinical director, or visit the Faculty of Medical Leadership and Management’s website.

Influence what happens where you work

Informal networks and influence: physicians also have the skills, expertise and networks to influence the commissioning system without having any formal role in it. Starting a simple conversation to develop a relationship with the CCG clinical lead for a particular specialty is the foundation stone on which bigger conversations can then be built. Similarly, relationships can be developed with NHS England’s and Public Health England’s regional teams, which for example lead on highly specialised and screening services. Physicians can bring together commissioners, provider trusts, patients and clinicians to advocate for better ways of designing services that respond to patients’ needs. From core medical trainees to senior consultants, physicians have a unique opportunity to be proactive and help their medical directors and clinical leads to shape the way the NHS works in their area.

Regional opportunities

Improve the quality of care commissioned in your area

Clinical senates: hosted by NHS England, these multidisciplinary groups provide expert advice that supports commissioners to improve care for people in their region. By joining a clinical senate, physicians can influence at a strategic level and work with both commissioners and providers across an entire region. This is an opportunity for physicians to share clinical expertise and leadership to help drive up the quality of care commissioned in their region.

> To find out how you can join the clinical senate in your area, contact the NHS England clinical senate manager for your region.

Promote joined-up working across complex patient pathways

Strategic clinical networks (SCNs): these are regional networks that bring together providers, commissioners, patients and health professionals to improve outcomes in four clinical areas: cancer; cardiovascular; maternity, children and young people; and mental health, dementia and neurological conditions. By joining an SCN, physicians can work alongside other healthcare professionals to promote joined-up working and improve how patient care is commissioned across entire patient pathways.

> To find out how you can join an SCN in your area, visit the SCN pages of the NHS England website.
Shape national good practice in patient care

Guideline development groups (GDGs): these groups of healthcare professionals, patients and other experts develop clinical guidelines produced by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE). The RCP hosts the National Clinical Guideline Centre, which produces many of these guidelines on behalf of NICE and is one of the largest clinical guideline development organisations in the world. These guidelines are instrumental in shaping commissioning policy and practice, locally and nationally. Each guideline has its own GDG to lead its development. Physicians are often leading members of GDGs, particularly where a guideline focuses on patients’ needs that are usually coordinated by physicians (e.g. acute or chronic medical conditions).

> To find out how you can join a GDG, visit the GDG pages of the NICE website.

National opportunities

Champion a whole clinical field

National clinical directors (NCDs): these clinical leaders work closely with NHS England to champion quality improvement in a particular clinical area. There are more than 20 NCDs, each covering a different clinical field, and almost all of these areas relate directly to the work that physicians do. This role offers a great opportunity for physicians to help shape and guide commissioning practice, from sharing your ideas for improvement with the NCD for your field of medicine, to stepping up into vacant NCD roles.

> To find out more about NCDs, including the name of the NCD for your area of medicine, visit the NCD pages of NHS England’s website.

Shape the way specialised services work for patients

Clinical reference groups (CRGs): these groups of clinicians, commissioners and patient experts advise NHS England on the commissioning of specialised services. Physicians are key members of most CRGs, each of which advises on one or more specialised or highly specialised service (that require highly specialised care and are accessed by relatively small numbers of patients). CRGs prepare the strategies and specifications that determine what specialised services will look like in practice, meaning that the first-hand clinical insight of physicians is critical to CRGs’ success.

> To find out more, see NHS England’s national guidance on CRGs. To get involved in CRGs’ work or to become a member, register as a stakeholder on the NHS England website.

Lead your profession

The RCP: our elected officers, council members and clinical leads are physicians working to champion high-quality patient care on behalf of their profession. From specialty-specific committees, to thematic programmes of work, to the RCP president, there are countless different ways that physicians can work through the RCP to influence the commissioning system at a national level. Other professional bodies, medical royal colleges and specialty societies also offer opportunities for physicians to help shape the future of health services, including the commissioning system.

> To find out more about the RCP’s national influence, visit our website. To get involved in leading the RCP, look out for opportunities in our membership magazine Commentary, our president’s monthly membership bulletin and our website.

Useful resources: find out more and get involved

The RCP and our partners

> Our website: www.rcplondon.ac.uk
> Secondary care doctors on CCGs: www.rcplondon.ac.uk/sites/default/files/collaboration_in_clinical_leadership_.pdf
> Guide to key terms used in commissioning, contracting and payment: www.rcplondon.ac.uk/sites/default/files/commissioning_secondary_care_-_what_does_it_all_mean_final_web_.pdf
> Faculty of Medical Leadership and Management www.fmilm.ac.uk

Local Government Association

> Health and wellbeing boards: www.local.gov.uk/health/-/journal_content/56/10180/3510973/ARTICLE

NHS England

> Clinical reference groups: www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/dcom/spec-serv/crg/
> Clinical senates: www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/part-rel/cs/get-involved/
> National clinical directors: www.england.nhs.uk/about/whos-who/ncd/
> Strategic clinical networks: www.england.nhs.uk/ourwork/part-rel/scn/get-involved/
> Regional teams: www.england.nhs.uk/about/regional-area-teams/
About the RCP

The RCP aims to improve patient care and reduce illness, in the UK and across the globe. We are patient centred and clinically led. Our 30,000 members worldwide work in hospitals and the community across 30 different medical specialties, diagnosing and treating millions of patients with a huge range of medical conditions.

Involving patients and carers at every step, the RCP works to ensure that physicians are educated and trained to provide high-quality care. We audit and accredit clinical services, and provide resources for our members to assess their own services. We work with other health organisations to enhance the quality of medical care, and promote research and innovation. We also promote evidence-based policies to government to encourage healthy lifestyles and reduce illness from preventable causes.

Working in partnership with our faculties, specialist societies and other medical royal colleges on issues ranging from clinical education and training to health policy, we present a powerful and unified voice to improve health and healthcare.