



Royal College
of Physicians

Faculty of
Physician Associates

Focus on physician associates: census 2020





Introduction

The Faculty of Physician Associates (FPA) census has been running since 2014. It provides insight that is vital for workforce planning and research, and seeks to reflect the experiences of physician associates (PA) both registered and in training.

The FPA census provides a key evidence base for the PA profession. As the profession grows, we need to add to this evidence base to ensure that we can plan appropriately. We encourage national NHS organisations, such as NHS digital, to ensure that key data sets they manage have appropriate coding for PAs so that in time we can develop a full picture of the profession.



Key points

- > PAs continue to be satisfied with their roles, even though 42% say they work under excessive pressure. **94% of respondents said they enjoyed their job** and 92% would recommend it to a friend.
- > The number of respondents with **protected time in their contract has increased** since the 2019 census report; however, only 47% said they were always able to use it. Around two-thirds still do not have protected time.
- > More respondents reported carrying out medical activities such as taking bloods, cannulation and arterial blood gas (ABG). **There was a significant increase in respondents practising more advanced procedural skills** such as lumbar punctures, ultrasonography, chest tube/drain insertion and paracentesis. This progression in the PA skill set highlights a growing ability to further support the wider team.
- > Fewer respondents were carrying out surgical, critical care and accident and emergency activities, such as suturing and surgical first assist. This may reflect **the growing number of PAs working in general practice.**
- > 12% took part in on-call rotas and worked 9 hours or less on average.

Next steps

The profession continues to grow year on year, with PAs developing new skills and taking on additional duties. As you would expect from a relatively new profession, there are still a number of significant milestones ahead which will help to develop the profession further.

The first of these will be statutory regulation, which should come into force in the latter half of 2022. This year we responded to the government consultation on the reform and have worked closely with the General Medical Council (GMC) to ensure a smooth transition. This work will continue and we will keep FPA members informed.

Some of the things we said we would do in the past year have been delayed due to the pandemic, but we have made progress. In the year ahead we will:

- > survey our members to better understand the pressures of the role and understand what support they need to avoid burnout and maintain their wellbeing
- > work with PAs across the UK nations to better understand the different challenges they face and look at how we might be able to provide support
- > continue to work with regional networks to help create a supportive environment for PAs
- > monitor the impact of the steps we have taken to ensure greater transparency around leadership roles in the FPA
- > continue to work with Health Education England (HEE) to make sure the career framework that is in development for 2022 meets the needs of PAs and the NHS
- > continue to work with medical royal colleges and specialty organisations to develop tailored specialty guidance for PAs, focusing on employment and retention of PAs as well as career development.

Methodology

Each PA and student PA received a unique link to a personalised survey from the RCP's Medical Workforce Unit. Links were sent electronically between October and December 2020 to PAs on the managed voluntary register (MVR) and PA student members. There were 958 survey respondents, of whom 742 were PAs and 216 PA students.

In addition to the data collected via the survey, this report draws on the membership data held by the FPA and RCP. It helps provide a more complete insight into the PA workforce at the point of sending the census survey.

Physician associate workforce

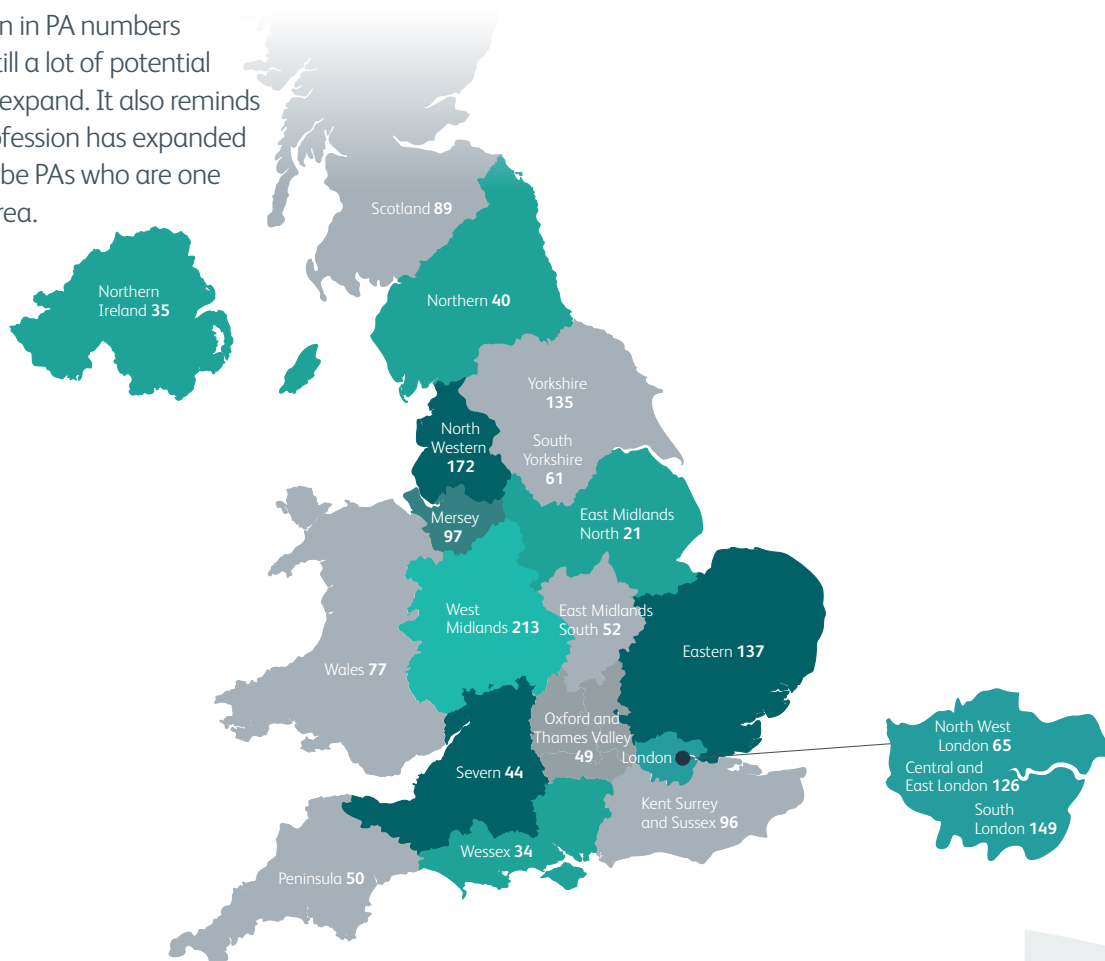
At 1 October 2020, there were 1,788 PAs on the MVR. 742 PAs completed the survey, a return rate of 41%.

Number of PAs by country

Country	MVR October 2020	Census respondents 2020	Census respondents 2019
England	1,559	592	396
Northern Ireland	35	23	10
Scotland	89	43	33
Wales	77	33	31

Number of PAs by RCP region

The regional variation in PA numbers shows that there is still a lot of potential for the profession to expand. It also reminds us that, while the profession has expanded rapidly, there will still be PAs who are one of very few in their area.





Demographics

- > 66% of respondents were women and 22% were men, with 12% of respondents preferring not to answer.
- > Two-thirds of respondents identified as English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British. The next largest groups were African (6.5%), Indian (4.75%) and Asian (4.5%).
- > 7% of respondents considered themselves to be disabled or have a long-term health condition.
- > 78% of respondents were heterosexual. Around 5% were gay men or women, and 2% were bisexual.

Education

The majority (59%) of respondents had completed a postgraduate diploma. A further 40% held a master’s degree.

A small number, around 1% took a different route, with either a certificate or a bachelor’s degree. These are usually earlier qualifications from the USA, where just under 3% of respondents trained.

Previous healthcare experience

56% of respondents had healthcare experience across 38 different roles before becoming a PA. Among them, the most common (38%) was as a healthcare assistant with 148 respondents, followed by volunteer in a healthcare setting (64 respondents), nurse or clinical laboratory technician (36 respondents each). 7% of respondents with previous healthcare experience had prescribing rights in their previous role.

The role

Practice status

Status (choose all that apply)	%
Practising as a physician associate	80%
Practising as a physician associate in a training post	7%
PA educator (clinical)	4%
PA educator (non-clinical)	8%
Researcher	8%
Working, but not as a physician associate	1%
Currently seeking work as a physician associate	5%
Not working right now (eg for family care or personal reasons)	2%
Physician associate ambassador	1%
Retired	0% (0.1)
Have become a doctor/surgeon or have entered medical school	0% (0.3)
Other	1.1%

Clinical settings

65% of respondents were working in secondary care, with an NHS trust as their main employer. 31% were employed by a general practice or primary care network.

Respondents were working in a range of clinical settings, including 32% in an inpatient ward, 35% in a GP surgery, 10% in a medical assessment unit and 10% in accident and emergency. Other settings included specialist surgery, psychiatry or mental health service, operating theatre, intensive care unit and urgent care centre. 159 respondents were also working in a secondary area.

Specialties

The number of specialties that PAs work in has increased since last year, from 39 to 51. Most respondents were working in one specialty, but 18% also worked in a secondary specialty.

Specialty	%
General practice	30%
Acute medicine	13%
Emergency medicine	9%
Care of the elderly / geriatrics	5%
General surgery	5%
Respiratory medicine	3%
Gastroenterology	3%
General internal medicine	2%
Haematology	2%
Psychiatry	2%
Cardiology	2%
Trauma and orthopaedics	2%
Stroke medicine	2%
Orthopaedic surgery	1%
Urology	1%
Community medicine	1%
Obstetrics and gynaecology	1%
Other	1%
Paediatric surgery	1%
Paediatrics	1%
Critical care	<1%
Neurology	<1%
Colorectal surgery	<1%
Educator	<1%
ENT/Otolaryngology	<1%

Specialties (cont.)

Specialty	%
Infectious diseases	<1%
Neonatology	<1%
Nephrology	<1%
Neurosurgery	<1%
Breast surgery	<1%
Dermatology	<1%
Endocrinology	<1%
Paediatrics – acute	<1%
Rehabilitation medicine	<1%
Researcher	<1%
Transplant surgery	<1%
Vascular surgery	<1%
Clinical oncology	<1%
Genitourinary medicine / sexual health	<1%
Oncology (medical)	<1%
Rheumatology	<1%
Spinal surgery	<1%
Anaesthesiology	<1%
Cardiothoracic surgery	<1%
General paediatrics	<1%
Hand surgery	<1%
Paediatric cardiology	<1%
Paediatric psychiatry	<1%
Plastic surgery	<1%
Public health	<1%
Transplantation medicine	<1%
None specified	1%

Clinical tasks

Physician associates carry out a wide range of clinical tasks, which of course vary depending on the specialty they are working in, but the majority of PAs carry out general medical activities.

Which of the following general medical activities do you perform? (select all that apply)	%
Perform physical examination	98%
Take medical history	96%
Manage acute conditions (eg musculoskeletal injury, lacerations, COPD flare)	86%
Perform patient education	89%
Manage chronic conditions (eg diabetes, high blood pressure, COPD)	77%
Manage emergent conditions (eg stroke, pulmonary embolus, chest pain, trauma)	68%
Perform psychiatric assessment	48%
Pelvic examination (palpation of cervix, uterus and adnexae)	27%

Which of the following miscellaneous activities do you perform? (select all that apply)	%
Take bloods / perform venepuncture	82%
Interpret ECG	77%
Arterial blood gas	61%
Place IVs / perform cannulation	53%
Urinary catheterisation	53%
NG tube placement	37%
Lumbar puncture	15%
Ultrasonography	10%
Chest tube/drain insertion	9%
Paracentesis / Peritoneal drain	9%
Pulmonary function testing	8%
General newborn examinations	8%
Cervical smear	5%
Skin biopsy	3%



Which of the following miscellaneous activities do you perform? (select all that apply)	%
Bone marrow biopsy	3%
Radiography	2%
Lipoma removal	2%
Coil/IUD removal	1%
Circumcision	<1%
Coil/IUD placement	<1%
Cystoscopy	<1%
Implant placement	<1%
Implant removal	<1%
Skin cancer removal	<1%
Gastroscopy (OGD)	<1%
Sigmoidoscopy	<1%
Colonoscopy	<1%
DEXA scanning	<1%

If you selected surgical, critical care or accident and emergency as your main specialty, which activities do you perform? (select all that apply)	%
Arterial blood gas	87%
Urinary catheterisation	74%
NG tube placement	50%
Suturing	23%
Lumbar puncture	18%
Surgical first assisting	10%
Arterial line insertion	4%
Chest tube/drain insertion	4%
Incision and drainage of abscess	3%
Paracentesis / peritoneal drain	3%
PICC line placement	3%

If you selected surgical, critical care or accident and emergency as your main specialty, which activities do you perform? (select all that apply)	%
Central line insertion	1%
Thoracentesis / pleural drain intubation	1%
FAST ultrasound testing for trauma	0%
Intubation	0%
Port placement (Groshong, Hickman, Mediports etc)	0%

If you selected orthopaedics, trauma or emergency medicine as your main specialty, which orthopaedic activities do you perform? (select all that apply)	%
Dislocation reduction	9%
Fracture reduction	9%
Casting/splinting	4%
Nerve blocks	4%
Joint aspiration/injection	4%
Haematoma blocks	4%
Bier blocks	0%

Contracted and worked hours

There was little variation between the hours PAs were contracted for and the hours they actually worked.

	Contracted average	Worked average
Direct clinical care	34	35
Supporting professional activities	7	6
Academic programmed activities	5	4
Other professional activities	6	5



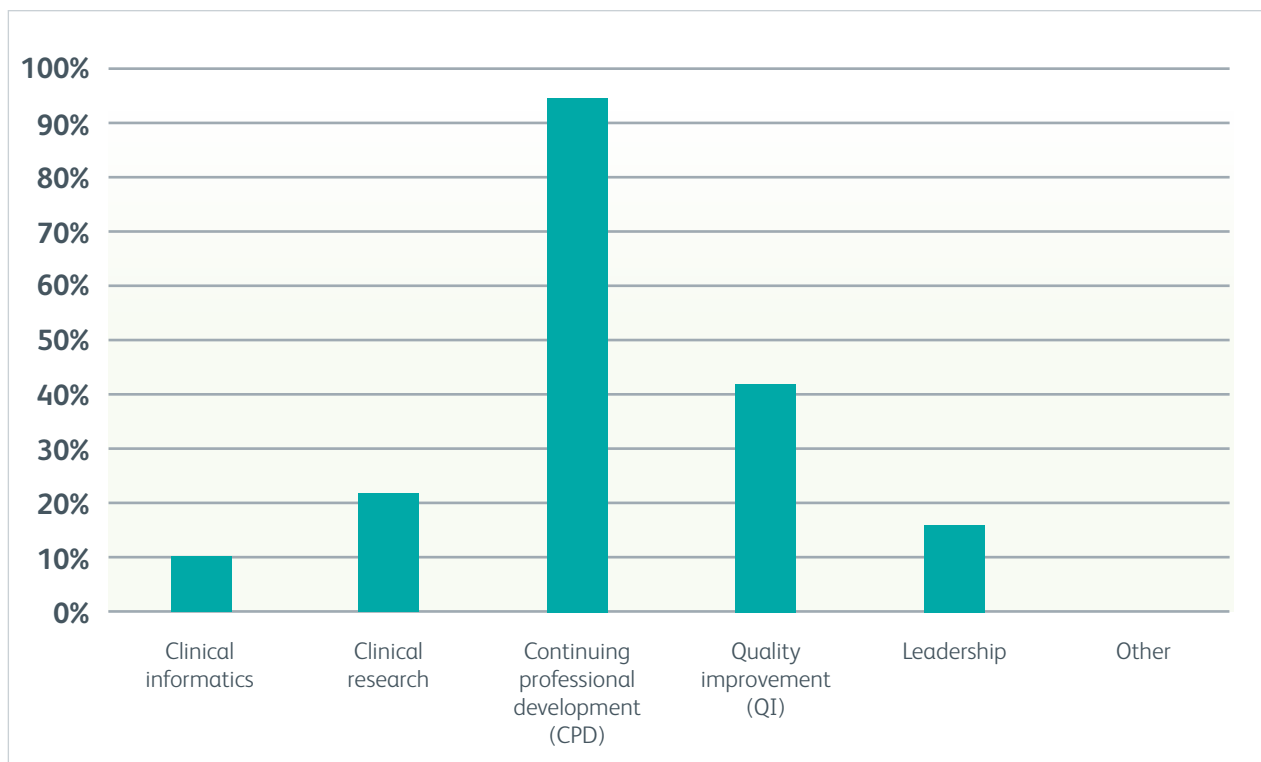
On-call and home visits

12% of respondents took part in an on-call rota. They are on call 9 hours or less per week on average. 25% of respondents undertook home visits.

Protected time

The number of respondents who have protected time has increased from 2019 (32% vs 28%). However, 63% of respondents said they did not have protected time as part of their contracts. The 32% that did have protected time usually had half a day a week. Only 47% said they were always able to use their protected time, 43% were able to sometimes and 9% were never or rarely able to use it.

What do you use your protected time for?

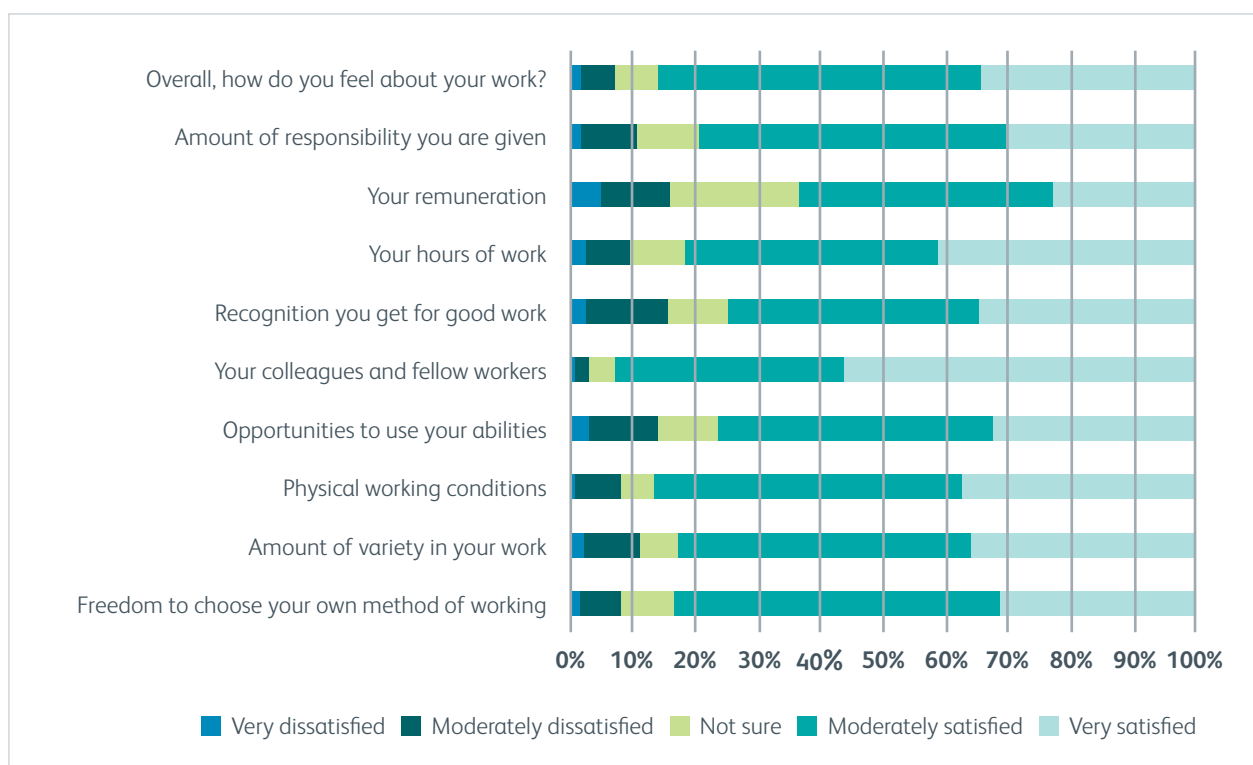


Indemnity

The FPA is often asked about indemnity insurance – in addition to NHS Resolution cover – for PAs. 49% of respondents were fully insured by their employer, 20% paid for their own insurance and 4% shared the cost. 13% didn't have additional insurance and 14% didn't know if they did.

Job satisfaction

The majority of respondents were either satisfied or very satisfied with all aspect of their roles. They are particularly satisfied with their colleagues and fellow workers. The area with the least satisfaction was remuneration (63%), followed closely by recognition (75%) and opportunities to use your abilities (76%).



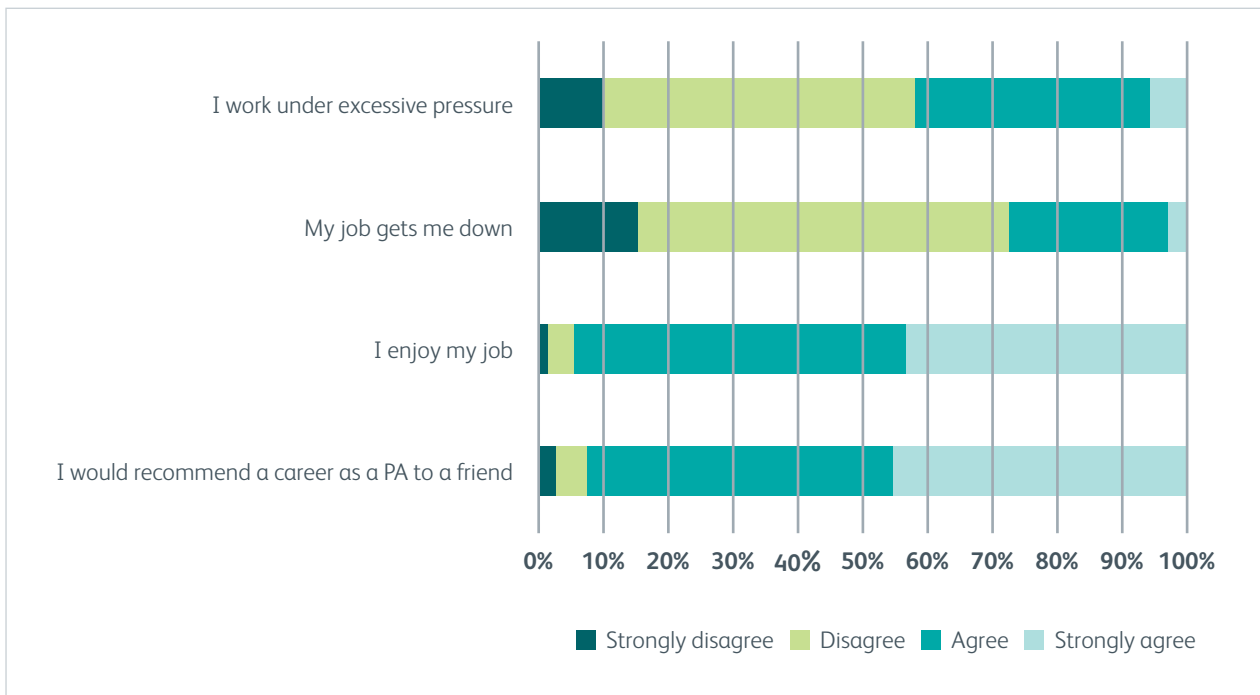
There was some variation between the nations of the UK. When asked how they feel about their work, taking everything into consideration, 85% of respondents in England, 90% in Northern Ireland, 95% in Scotland and 83% in Wales said they were satisfied. In general, the reasons for dissatisfaction in each of the nations were the same as those for the UK as a whole.

Respondents in England were most likely to cite working under excessive pressure. 43% felt they worked under excessive pressure, compared to 30% in Scotland. Within England there was significant regional variation, 60% of respondents in the North Western region felt they worked under excessive pressure, while in London (North West) this figure was only 30%.

Some variation in the experience of PAs was also evident when respondents were asked how satisfied they were that they had the freedom to choose their own method of working. 82% of respondents in England reported being satisfied, compared to 95% in Scotland. Within England, 73% in East Midlands and London (North East and Central) felt they had this freedom, notably lower than those in the North Western region (86%), Northern region (86%), Yorkshire and Humber (85%) and the South West (85%).

Morale

It is positive that 92% of respondents either agreed or strongly agreed that they would recommend the PA career to a friend, and that 94% enjoy their job. This was the case even though 42% either agreed or strongly agreed that they worked under excessive pressure.



Physician associate students

At 1 October 2020, there were 876 student members of the FPA. 216 completed the census return, a return rate of 25%.

Country	Student members October 2020	Census respondents 2020	Census respondents 2019
England	771	176	203
Northern Ireland	21	10	21
Scotland	12	2	4
Wales	47	9	7

Demographics

- > 63% of student respondents were women and 18% were men.
- > Just over half of respondents identified as English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish or British. The next largest groups were African (9.5%), Indian (4.5%) and Pakistani (3.5%).
- > 13% of respondents considered themselves to be disabled or have a long-term health condition.
- > Just over three-quarters (71%) of respondents were heterosexual. 5% were gay men or women, and 5% were bisexual.

The Faculty of Physician Associates

The Faculty of Physician Associates (FPA) at the Royal College of Physicians (RCP) provides professional support to physician associates across the UK.

Physician associates are healthcare professionals who, while not doctors, work to the medical model, with the attitudes, skills and knowledge base to deliver holistic care and treatment within the general medical and/or general practice team under defined levels of supervision.

Contact details

For queries relating to the 2020 FPA census, please contact the FPA membership team:

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