

October brings the chance for primary schools to raise the aspirations of their students by introducing them to people who work in healthcare. **Carly Chynoweth** reports on Primary Futures' latest initiative



Who's in health?

WHO CAN BE A DOCTOR? OR, COME TO THAT, a consultant, paramedic, midwife, pharmacist, medical scientist or other health professional?

The answer, of course, should be 'anyone with the aptitude and determination', but all too often young children rule themselves out of rewarding, valuable careers because they assume they don't have what it takes. This means assumptions made in primary school go on to shape choices made when selecting subjects at secondary school and when applying to university – which in turn limits young people's options.

But now universities, employers and doctors are joining forces with schools to help persuade children to keep an open mind about a career in medicine, through the 'Who's in health?' campaign, which invites health professionals to visit primary schools.

"The original working title was 'Medics' Month'," says NAHT

past president Steve Iredale. "We changed it because we want children to be aware of the huge range of roles open to them, from hospital porter to brain surgeon and dentist to dramatherapist."

The idea has its roots in a 2014 report by the Medical Schools Council (MSC) called *Selecting for excellence*, which found the majority of students who study medicine are from either a selective school or a top 20 per cent state school.

"One of the report's recommendations was that the MSC should look at ways to access primary schools so they could influence potential recruits at a much earlier stage," says Steve, who runs NAHT's Primary Futures team (see panel, right). "We realised we could help them and they could help us, because it is all about aspiration on both sides."

Selecting for excellence was produced after the medical profession was criticised heavily for its lack of progression in widening participation, explains Clare Owen, a policy adviser at the MSC. "Female and ethnic minority representation is quite good currently, but what isn't good enough is



→ Primary Futures

Raising attainment and aspiration

Primary Futures is a joint initiative between NAHT and the Education and Employers Taskforce charity, which runs Inspiring the Future – a similar initiative aimed at secondary schools. Between them they have a database of more than 23,000 people who have registered their willingness to spend an hour a year visiting schools to raise aspirations by talking about their jobs and how what they learned at primary school is still important to them today.

Nick Chambers, director of the charity, says: “When we started the Inspiring the Future programme to give young people insights into the world of work, it became clear that a lot of them had formed strong views and perceptions long before secondary school.

“We also had a lot of demand from primary schools seeking volunteers... so we talked to NAHT and came up with Primary Futures, which is tailored to their needs.”

The nationwide scheme will celebrate its first anniversary in October. NAHT past president Steve Iredale says: “It’s going extremely well so far. The next step is to secure more funding so we can place Primary Futures representatives in different parts of the country and reach even more schools and more young people.

“When school leaders tell me they love the idea but it is not a priority given all the pressure they are under, I usually respond with: ‘Surely aspiration has to be a priority.’

“We are looking to undertake research to show the programme is raising attainment as well as aspiration as a way to prove to funding bodies that it works, but as a professional I can say that when you see a kid’s eyes light up, you know it works.”



www.primaryfutures.org

the representation of people from a lower socioeconomic background, so we set up this project to look at it.”

“It’s a complex issue, but one thing we discovered was the importance of raising aspirations and offering outreach to talk about health careers. A lot of people just think of doctors and nurses in the NHS but there is a huge range of scientists and health professionals,” she says.

One thing the MSC research revealed was outreach work needs to be handled differently at different stages. Secondary school students who are preparing to apply for medical school need access to people with a high degree of insight and knowledge into that process, but at the early stages it is much more about inspiring children and helping them see the breadth of opportunity available to them. “What we are saying to young people is ‘the profession and the health service want people like you,’” says Clare.

“Who’s in health? is about broadening horizons and raising aspirations so children see all the options open to them and don’t start closing doors while they are at primary school,” adds Nick

Chambers, director of the Education and Employers Taskforce. “We found they were switching off early, saying: ‘I can’t do this because I am this gender or from this background.’

Clare adds: “The NHS needs the biggest talent pool it can get. No one should rule themselves out of a career in the NHS. It is a fantastic employer with wonderful careers on offer; it needs and wants to take advantage of all the talent that is available.” It’s for this reason that the NHS has turned to the Primary Futures matchmaking service.

Steve has two goals for the campaign. “We want more schools to get involved in Primary Futures and we want to raise young peoples’ aspirations so they understand more about the opportunities available to them in health and other professions. We want them to realise learning in primary school isn’t just about doing well in national tests but →

Who's in health? Your questions answered

🕒 building the foundation for careers.”

This part is very important, adds Nick. “Our experience shows that helping children to see the relevance of what they are learning in the classroom helps bring learning to life in the key stages,” he says.

Making the most of Who's in health? – or indeed Primary Futures – does require schools to sign up, but once they have registered they have automatic access to a database of potential volunteers from a wide variety of professions and sectors.

However, Steve stresses that coaching the volunteers is a critical component of getting the scheme to work. “Schools can prepare them so they can talk not just about how interesting their job is, but also how it links back to their grasp of English and maths.”

He suggests school leaders treat the scheme as a development opportunity for middle leaders. “Some of the most successful Primary Futures events have been run by middle leaders. In many instances they are looking at the whole-school curriculum and thinking about how to bring other volunteers back across the year.”

The way schools prepare their volunteers varies, adds Steve. Some simply get them to come a bit early so that they can have a look around and see the school, others invite them to visit beforehand to ‘meet the kids and staff, then have tea and buns’; the important thing for schools is to find an approach that suits them and their volunteers. “If you treat them well and with respect they will want to come back,” he says.

Nick also suggests encouraging volunteers to develop interactive sessions rather than simply standing up and talking. For instance, several volunteers could join in on a ‘speed-networking’ session that gives small groups of children the chance to spend 10 minutes with each volunteer.

“Another thing we find works well is when volunteers take in a prop,” he adds. “That could be a stethoscope, an x-ray, a blood-pressure cuff... once we had someone take in an anatomical skeleton of how the body works, which went down really well.”

Meanwhile, the MSC has been running a competition for

What is it? A national campaign to get thousands of people who work in healthcare to visit primary schools.

What will the volunteers do? Talk informally about their jobs, enthuse children about a possible career in healthcare and explain the relevance of what they are learning at key stage two.

When does it start? October.

Who's behind the initiative? NAHT, the Medical Schools Council, the Education and Employers Taskforce charity and the NHS.

I'd like my school to get involved. Where can we sign up to find local volunteers? Just follow the link below.



bit.ly/whosinhealth



medical students, encouraging them to come up with creative ways to engage with young people. The results will then be shared with other volunteers. One idea has been to teach children how to make a working stethoscope – thus linking science and health, says Clare. “But the real strength of this programme is that it allows schools to work with volunteers to decide what sort of messages they want their students to hear.”

Fourth-year medical student and future GP Clare Pearson (pictured, left) combined her medical studies with a Teaching in Medicine BMSc, from which she recently graduated. The one-year course, which doctors-to-be can take between their third and fourth years, is designed to prepare graduates for the teaching that they will do as doctors. It also gave Clare plenty of time to spend with primary school pupils.

“My partner and I worked with two year six classes once a week for six weeks to run sessions on being a

doctor and keeping healthy,” she says.

“The children were genuinely interested in what we did. It may never have crossed their minds that healthcare offers them the opportunity of a great career and we might be the ones to trigger that spark in them. One boy in the class who had been a bit rowdy initially came to speak to us at the end of the session to find out exactly what he had to do to be a surgeon. You never know, he may very well go on to pursue that.”