

## SAPC Heads of Department (HoDs) report: July 2024

### Overview

The first Scientific Meeting of University Departments of General Practice was held in Cardiff in June 1972 – it has continued as the Annual Scientific Meeting (ASM) since then. A series of four articles have been published online outlining the history of the SAPC and how it developed from the Association of University Teachers of General Practice (AUTGP).<sup>1</sup> Both the Head of Teachers (HoTs) group and HoDs are bound up in this history – HoDs can be traced back to the period just before the first ASM.

It is important to recognise this 52-year history and while there are few concerns about the importance of SAPC we also must acknowledge that the HoDs group has been going through a transition period, if not an existential crisis.

Current details of the HoDs group are held on the SAPC website:

<https://sapc.ac.uk/article/heads-of-department-hods-group>

When Prof Joanne Reeve stepped down as Chair in 2023 there was not a clear successor who emerged but there was, still, a willingness within many members of the group to recognise the value of HoDs and to keep it functioning. However, we can't sugarcoat the challenges in maintaining HoDs and there have been few people with the capacity to take on the role. There is the potential for the group to peter out as interest dwindles.

There are undoubtedly multiple difficulties at play here. Workload pressures in the NHS and the Higher Education environment are likely to be major contributory factors. In addition, the way that meetings are held and how people network has shifted significantly in the past 10-15 years. This was underway before Covid-19 — which has now normalised online meetings. There are now multiple avenues to establish communities of practice and most senior academics are generally immersed in those in their own field. It is not entirely surprising, if an individual's capacity is a concern, that the over-arching umbrella of 'academic general practice' is not necessarily prioritised — while few would argue with the importance of the discipline, the immediacy of pressure to manage large teams, grants, research projects etc is acute.

### Meetings

The structure of meetings has been slightly adjusted after discussion at the meeting in November 2023 in Warwick. Meetings will be held three times a year as follows:

- March: a virtual meeting.
- July: a hybrid meeting linked to the ASM.
- November: a virtual meeting.

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<sup>1</sup> Howie J, Freeman G, Heath H. General Practice and Universities in Britain Part 4: General practice as a discipline with its own philosophy. BJGP Life. Available at: <https://bjgplife.com/general-practice-and-universities-in-britain-part-4-general-practice-as-a-discipline-with-its-own-philosophy/>

There is a plan to invite appropriate national speakers to the March/November meetings — this is hugely facilitated by the flexibility of the online meeting format and its near-ubiquity post-pandemic.

Topics and areas covered in meetings in the past 12 months:

- Sharing of current work and challenges with regular departmental updates from across the UK. We have also been able to support colleagues who are facing particularly difficult circumstances in their own institutions.
- Judith Ibison has continued to lead the academic workforce project.
- Simon Royal was invited to speak and field questions as the NIHR CRN GP National Specialty Lead for primary care at the March 2024 meeting.
- The ongoing work at RCGP and SAPC and how best HoDs can contribute.
- National level concerns such as Clinical Excellence Awards receive regular discussion at HoDs meetings.

### **Funding**

It has been established that there is a small pot of money that is directly linked to HoDs and can be used to support the group's activities. The ongoing cost of running the meetings is now minimal – Zoom/Teams does not cost anything to the group and the July hybrid meeting has been encompassed within the ASM.

An immediate priority is to hold a discussion with HoDs and formulate a plan to use these funds appropriately to support the group.

### **Communication**

Currently, there are over 60 email addresses on the SAPC HoDs list. This has led to some challenges with storing the lists, ensuring they are accurate, and it is clunky to cut and paste that number of addresses into Outlook.

A JiscMail group has been created to facilitate email group communications. JiscMail is the home of “Email discussion lists for the UK Education and Research communities”. We are a perfect fit. It is likely that many UK academics will already be subscribed to one or more JiscMail newsletters.

They can be created in various ways – some are huge public forums but the SAPC-HODS group has been created as an entirely private community.

When people are added to a JiscMail email list they have the option to create an account and control how emails are received – for instance, you can get a daily digest rather than each individual email. However, with the standard settings, most people will notice no difference compared with an ordinary email group.

There are some key differences:

- We will be able to email all SAPC HoDs by using a single email address. ([SAPC-HODS@jiscmail.ac.uk](mailto:SAPC-HODS@jiscmail.ac.uk))

- There are no plans to introduce moderation or other controls but those options do exist if required in the future.
- There will be an archive and a files area of emails and attachments.
- As stated above, it is an entirely private list, and so it will not be listed on the JiscMail catalogue, and membership will be controlled by the HoDs chair/sec/SAPC admin only.
- JiscMail has robust privacy and data policies ensuring the list management is fully GDPR compliant.

### **The future**

The chair is now Euan Lawson and the secretary is Judith Ibison. Judith is in the process of standing down this year after many years of diligent work and for which we all thank her.

This offers the opportunity to re-think how these roles are structured for the future.

I would regard the three meetings per year as the core offering of HoDs. Ideally, this can then be used as a platform to share experiences across institutions and for mutual support; there will be a chance to form partnerships with scope to work together on cross-institutional projects as they emerge; and if the invited speakers provide opportunities to advocate for academic general practice at a national level then that is likely to help draw HoDs together.

It's a difficult time — but then it is, let's be honest, hard everywhere in healthcare, higher education and research: academic general practice catches it from several different angles. We must continue to find a way to ensure the group is useful and sustainable for the HoDs, as well as academic general practice more widely.

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