

The who's who of healthcare

Knowing there is a team of health professionals to support you in managing your condition is very reassuring when you have arthritis. **Helen Nickols** looks at the individual roles of a few different health professionals

Health professionals work within a team to address the different needs of a person with arthritis. This might include running tests to monitor your condition, discussing how you can manage your symptoms or referring you on to a surgeon or consultant for further treatment. Health professionals can also support you to manage pain and take positive steps to manage your arthritis.

But with such a range of different roles, it can be confusing knowing who can help in a particular instance, especially if you are under the care of a number of health professionals at the same time. Here we look at the roles of four people working in a typical healthcare team, and talk to professionals and people with arthritis.

GP

General practitioners (GPs) work in the local community on a range of health conditions, and are the main point of contact for any long-term care

The professional – Dr Rob Hicks

'People with arthritis self-refer themselves to me and then if we both think it is appropriate, I refer them to onto a different health professional, such as a rheumatologist, an orthopaedic surgeon, or a physiotherapist. A person may already be under the care of a specialist if they have a history of arthritis.

If someone comes to see me about their arthritis, I find out why. It might be that their pain isn't under control, their mobility is affected or they want to try another treatment. If they have come to see me about a non arthritis-related issue and we have time to discuss their arthritis, I ask about the pain, and whether it stops them from doing what they want to do.

I would say that if you have something on your mind about your arthritis, or if something is not going quite right, do raise it with your GP. If a person is silent, as a GP you can think that everything is fine, but I know this is not always the case.'

The experience – Emma Rennison

'I had already been diagnosed with osteoarthritis when I met my GP. I was born with a hip problem and then developed arthritis at the age of 20 after an operation.

When I first saw my GP, I think she was quite interested

because, as a young person with arthritis, it was a bit different to the usual cold or upset stomach. I talk about the ways that my arthritis affects my life, and she tells me about things to watch out for. She doesn't just prescribe anti-inflammatories.

She listens to me when I talk about feeling low about things and we have developed a really good relationship. I have been seeing her every couple of months for the last two years, and she has become more informed about arthritis the longer I have known her. It has made a real difference to receive her support.'

RHEUMATOLOGIST

Rheumatologists are hospital-based doctors specially trained in arthritis and other diseases that affect the joints. A rheumatologist can diagnose a condition based on tests results, discuss treatment, prescribe drugs or refer a person on to surgery

The professional – Dr Chris Deighton

'The only way that a person can access my service is by being referred by another healthcare professional, usually a GP.

When I see a person for the first time, I have quite a lot of information about them from the GP referral letter. We talk through their medical history and I examine them. Sometimes I can make a diagnosis, but it's more common that we need to do further investigations, such as X-rays or blood tests.

If I think someone has rheumatoid arthritis, I refer them to an expert nurse who will discuss medication and liaise with other members of the healthcare team. I work very closely with nurses, physiotherapists, orthopaedic surgeons and other specialists.'

The experience – Len Madden

'I felt relieved when I was referred to a rheumatologist as I was in a lot of pain with my rheumatoid arthritis. When we

meet, he goes through my list of drugs and ensures I am taking the correct dose. He asks me lots of questions so that it is clear to him that I know what I am doing. We talk through any concerns, questions or worries.

We then go through any test results from the previous three months and discuss any changes that he would like to make to my doses of steroids and methotrexate.

I have seen him every three months for the last five years. As a result of his treatment, I had a prompt hip replacement and the pain from my arthritis is now bearable. I feel that his early diagnosis of the problem, treatment and aftercare have made a big impact. It has really turned my life around.'

RHEUMATOLOGY NURSE SPECIALIST

A rheumatology nurse specialist is a trained nurse who helps people with arthritis to learn about their condition and manage their medication, as well as provide emotional support

The professional – Susan Oliver

'A person will typically see a rheumatologist who will then refer to me. I provide a person-centred treatment, based around what the patient wants to discuss, and their needs and anxieties.

When a person has been newly diagnosed, I talk to them about their medication. I can also be involved in seeing a person regularly to assess their disease activity and carry out tests.

I talk to people about their arthritis and how they are going to manage practically, for example, if they have young children. We talk through what can be expected from the condition, and I provide

information about self-management, coping with pain and managing medication.

Nurses often run telephone support

services and so people with arthritis can come into contact with them in this way – such as if they are having a flare up.

I help a person for as long as they have the disease and are on treatment.'

The experience – Kathleen Pemberton

'I first saw a specialist nurse because I took part in a clinical trial for infliximab in 2001. It was these nurses who monitored the trial, and I then continued seeing a nurse for ongoing care of my rheumatoid arthritis and osteoarthritis.

I visit my rheumatology nurse specialist on her clinic days. We talk in her office, and she takes blood tests, looks at my notes and asks how I am. If I have a problem she will feel the joints to see if there is any swelling.

If she is unsure about something, she pops next door to see a consultant who can normally answer her queries. They work very closely together.

The appointments are about 10-15 minutes long, but they don't feel rushed. I can also phone her whenever I want. If I leave a message she will always get back to me.'

ORTHOPAEDIC SURGEON

Orthopaedic surgeons specialise in muscle and bone disorders, and use surgical means to address musculoskeletal conditions

The professional – Mr John Getty

'There are a variety of routes through which someone can access me, but it is usually via a GP.

The first time I see someone I take their medical history, age, occupation and build up a picture of their musculoskeletal disability.

If they have pain in the hip joint, for example, I ask how severe it is and whether it wakes them up at night, prevents them from walking or affects their independence in the home – such as with cutting toenails or putting on shoes and socks. I would see if movement is restricted or painful and would then take an X-ray.

On the basis of all this information, I would assess whether the patient needs medication, physiotherapy, further scans or surgery.

If a patient can come to an appointment with a list of their medication and having thought about what has bothered them then that's a super help.

The experience – Maxine Mulrooney

'I was referred by my GP to see an orthopaedic surgeon after seeing a number of consultants. I have systemic arthritis in most joints of my body and misformed femurs.

He needed to operate but I first had many consultations involving scans and a whole range of tests. After the operation I had X-rays to check that the bones had healed properly. My surgery was extensive, and during my recovery period, I saw my surgeon every three to six months.

My consultant gave me the number of his secretary and so if there was ever a problem I could get in touch. He has been really thorough and always explained everything – I was never left guessing. 

