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## The role of the therapeutic radiographer is changing. But what is a therapeutic radiographer, I hear you ask?

Patients who have had a course of radiotherapy to treat cancer will be well aware of who we are and what we do. We don't take pictures and we aren't just button pushers, we use high energy X-rays to treat a variety of different cancers. In fact 40% of people with cancer will receive radiotherapy and it will cure more cancers than cancer drugs. It can be used to reduce symptoms and, most importantly, pain. As a treatment that is used to kill cancer cells it is cost effective when compared to the cost of chemotherapy drugs and for most people doesn't require being admitted to hospital. For the patient it's as simple as lying still on a couch whilst the therapeutic radiographers position the treatment machine around them.

Individuals who are unfortunate enough to have had a cancer diagnosis will have met a variety of people along their treatment journey including doctors, nurses and radiographers (both diagnostic and therapeutic). Whilst most people are aware of the amazing job that cancer nurses do, without the other healthcare professionals there wouldn't be a service to offer. Even now there is a general assumption that, if you are female and work in radiotherapy, you are a nurse.

Historically the therapeutic radiographer would take an X-ray picture of the area to be treated, prepare and then deliver that treatment. However nowadays, from the moment a patient is given their diagnosis by a doctor, you may only see therapeutic radiographers throughout their cancer journey.

The therapeutic radiographer is able to consent a patient for treatment, prescribe radiation, and even perform small procedures such as inserting gold seed markers into a prostate to make treatment more accurate. We may well see them for follow-up appointments

and prescribe medications to help manage any side-effects. We are able to combine our technical skills with a more holistic approach to better deal with the side-effects of treatment. I am a site specialist practitioner for prostate and bladder cancers and part of my role is to support both the patient and their family throughout treatment, I provide continuity of care throughout the course of radiotherapy.

I am one of those therapeutic radiographers who is able to practise at an advanced level, having had robust training to ensure that I am competent and safe to perform procedures and prescribe medications.

However, I still feel that I and colleagues of mine practising at this level don't get the recognition we deserve.

The move into independent prescribing for therapeutic radiographers, which will bring us in line with other healthcare professionals such as nurses, physiotherapists and podiatrists has recently been approved by Parliament. This will allow for even more autonomy within our advancing roles. It took me 10 years to get my advanced practitioner status but now it appears to me that there is a lack of consistency across the board and, if you chat to three different people in radiotherapy, you will get three different views about what advancing practice is.

This confusion is also not helped by different radiotherapy departments using expert and advanced practitioner titles within their teams without considering what is advanced practice and how these roles demonstrate the benefits to the patient and service. It's not just about a title. These advanced roles allow for more specialist patient-centred care and, unlike diagnostic radiographers, we may see our patients for up to eight weeks at a time so we get to know them well.

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As far back as 2002, when the Society and College of Radiographers published its Education and Professional Development Strategy, there has been an emphasis on shorter waiting times and increased choice for patients. This has led to developing roles and increased responsibilities for all allied health professionals - for example my current Advanced Practitioner role was developed after a gap was identified in the quality of support for men with urological cancer. The advanced practitioner roles were recommended by the National Radiotherapy Advisory Group as they demonstrated the potential to drive efficiency and refocus radiotherapy around the needs of the patient. Advanced practitioners are expected to develop enhanced skills in their specialist areas and practise autonomously. This means we are legally accountable for those actions.

It is a frustration as a therapeutic radiographer that we rarely get a mention and seem a long way down the pecking order in healthcare professional terms. Some notable health organisations even get it wrong, describing all key workers as nurses, which does nothing to help our cause. I guess as a workforce we sometimes don't do ourselves any favours as having a plethora of job titles is confusing - are we therapy radiographers, radiotherapists, radiation therapists or, to use our legally protected title, therapeutic radiographers? This bewilders not only people in the profession but also the average person in the street. So perhaps we need to get our own house in order first.

There is a lot to celebrate and be happy about as an advanced practice therapeutic radiographer. The opportunity to further develop my role to become a consultant radiographer is exciting but, most of all, seeing patients at follow-up and telling them their treatment has gone well and we've cured their cancer is a feeling like no other.

However I think that as a profession there is more that needs to be done to bring clarity to the role that we play and raise its profile, so that there is the correct level of investment in site specialist practitioners and so that the public can gain a greater understanding of what we do.

*Phil Reynolds recently played a role in the development of a report led by Prostate Cancer UK and the Society and College of Radiographers which assessed the current situation in relation to the United Kingdom prostate/urology site specialist radiographer workforce. The Prostate/Urology Specialist Cancer Workforce: Provision of Specialist Therapeutic Radiographers in the Treatment and Care of Men with Prostate Cancer can be downloaded at <http://www.sor.org/learning/document-library>*



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