



Healthcare
Improvement
Scotland

SHTG
Advice on health
technologies

The use of Surgical Care Practitioners (SCPs) to perform high-volume, low-complexity surgical clinic work and procedures

Plain language summary | January 2026

What were we asked to look at?

We were asked to assess the clinical effectiveness, cost effectiveness and safety of surgical care practitioners (SCPs) in performing routine, high-volume surgical clinic work and procedures. We also reviewed the evidence on patients' experiences of care provided by SCPs, from referral through to discharge.

What are SCPs?

SCPs are registered healthcare professionals, usually nurses, who are not medically qualified as doctors but have advanced clinical training through accredited specialist education. They are key members of the surgical team, providing care throughout the patient journey, from referral to discharge. SCPs may work in outpatient clinics, day-case surgery, and help with care before, during and after operations.

SCPs can perform minor surgical procedures under supervision (for example, wound closures and carpal tunnel surgery) and assist in complex operations, such as harvesting veins for heart bypass surgery. They work closely with consultant surgeons. The inclusion of SCPs in the surgical team may help free up time for consultants to focus on more complex surgical cases and to support trainee surgeons.

How many SCPs are there in NHS Scotland, and what do they do?

SCPs have been part of the NHS since the 1990s, mainly in England. In Scotland, there are only around 30 SCPs. Most work in cardiothoracic or plastic surgery, while others support orthopaedics, general surgery, gynaecology and urology.

The role of SCPs differs across countries and settings. In the NHS, many SCPs work as highly skilled surgical assistants, supporting surgeons during operations. In Scotland, new SCP roles are

emerging where practitioners independently carry out less complex procedures that are commonly performed in high numbers, such as circumcisions and vasectomies.

Why is this important?

Currently in Scotland, a small number of SCPs are based in a few distinct locations rather than system-wide. Our assessment will help guide decisions on whether to introduce SCPs more widely across NHSScotland.

The successful expansion of SCP roles within NHSScotland offers several potential benefits. These include reducing reliance on agency staff, improving service productivity, reducing waiting times for patients, enhancing patient satisfaction and freeing up resources for use elsewhere in the NHS.

What we did

To produce our assessment, we reviewed the published literature on the clinical and cost effectiveness, patient experience and safety of SCPs.

What we found

There are substantial differences in SCP roles, training, and responsibilities across countries and surgical specialties, and the available evidence is limited and mixed. Because of this, we cannot draw firm conclusions about how effective, safe or cost effective SCPs are in performing routine, high-volume procedures in Scotland.

Although the research is under-developed, the existing studies suggest that SCPs can safely carry out certain procedures, helping to reduce waiting times and improve patient satisfaction, but these findings are context-specific. For example, a case study from NHS Forth Valley showed that SCPs successfully performed straightforward urology procedures, such as vasectomies and circumcisions, which helped reduce waiting times. However, these results reflect one service model and may not be generalisable to other settings.

What is our conclusion?

We need more high-quality research, especially in Scotland, but current evidence suggests SCPs could help address workforce and service challenges in surgery. To expand their role safely and consistently, clear rules, standardised training, and ongoing evaluation and research are essential.

What next?

Our assessment will help NHS Scotland decide whether and how to expand the use of SCPs.

This plain language summary has been produced based on an SHTG Assessment:
The use of Surgical Care Practitioners (SCPs) to perform high-volume, low-complexity surgical clinic work and procedures