Ensuring safe, sustainable and productive staffing

Sam Foster, Chief Nurse, Oxford University Hospitals, considers the impact of the staffing crisis and guidance produced for the National Quality Board around changes in staffing and skill mix.

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de current workforce crisis leaves senior nurses across the country with no other option than to plan for changes in skill mix to deliver patient care. NHS Improvement (2016a) noted a rapid rise in demand for hospital nurses ever since the publication of the Francis report in 2013, but the supply fell short. The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) (2018) has reported that the number working outside the UK (47%), and change in personal circumstances (22%) and Brexit has encouraged me to consider (25%), while from the 227 EEA respondents (26%) and change in personal circumstances (22%). Health Education England (HEE) (2017) reported that the NHS in England was short of 42 000 nurses, midwives and therapists. In addition to the staffing shortages and difficulties recruiting and retaining staff, HEE predicted that the NHS workforce will need to increase by a further 190 000 by 2027 to keep pace with the increased demand for services.

NHS Improvement has produced guidance on ‘Safe, Sustainable and Productive Staffing’ for a range of specialties on behalf of the National Quality Board (NQB). This guidance, for example for adult inpatient wards (NHS Improvement, 2018a), is in line with the expectations and framework set out in the National Quality Board’s (2016) policy document for safe, effective, caring, responsive and well-led care on a sustainable basis, which suggested that we need to use our valuable registered nursing workforce wisely.

I am a great supporter of new roles, such as the nurse associate, however, as I prepare a paper to present to the public Trust board meeting to outline plans to change the skill mix across our wards and departments, I know that the local media will report that we have diluted the registered nurse complement. I need to consider how we will monitor the quality impact of any changes on patients and staff.

I would suggest that there is no one-size-fits-all model of nurse staffing. NHS Employers (2018) shared a case study from Chesterfield Royal Hospital. Using the concept of building a team around the patient, having identified skills needed to deliver best care, the Trust has introduced trainee nursing associates and assistant practitioners who, when qualified, will provide capacity for the band 5 staff to work to the top of their licence. The Trust engaged its staff to help develop the new team structure, addressed the issues this presented, and now other wards are looking to adopt the model.

The landscape has changed, both in terms of changing population need and the variety of roles that have developed to deliver care (Stephenson, 2018). Although there are concerns about the risk associated with lower registered nurse levels (Griffiths et al, 2017; 2018), doing nothing and an overreliance on temporary staff should not be our medium- to long-term plan. Changing the skill mix and minimising any negative impact on patient experience and quality of care will require the registered nurses to work in different way. There needs to be a focus on aspects such as: understanding their personal accountability, particularly in relation to supervision and task delegation, and oversight of clinical care such as medication administration and care of clinically unstable patients, as well as maintaining patient flow and delivery of patient pathways. In essence the requirement will be that the registered nurse will be required to work to the top of their NMC registration at all times.

In line with the NHS Improvement (2018b) technical guidance for NHS planning, it is also essential that there is an assessment and monitoring of an effective quality impact assessment. Applying the Shelford Group-developed Safer Nursing Care Tool (http://tinyurl.com/y9w22aq4) recommended nurse sensitive indicators to monitor care will be my approach. BJN

National Quality Board. Supporting NHS providers to deliver the right staff, with the right skills, in the right place at the right time: safe, sustainable and productive staffing. 2016. http://tinyurl.com/znmbuzh (accessed 5 September 2018)
