

Editorial

Getting more men into nursing: an urgent priority (too little, too late)

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It is acknowledged that increased investment in nursing is key to achieving health for all, yet the World Health Organization estimates a global shortfall of 9 million nurses and midwives needed to deliver and sustain universal health coverage by 2030 (WHO, 2016). Thus, a key objective of the WHO global strategic directions for strengthening nursing and midwifery is to educate, recruit, deploy and retain the right number of nurses and midwives (WHO, 2016).

The Nursing Now campaign aims to improve health and health care globally by raising the status and profile of nursing worldwide (Crisp, 2018, Crisp & Iro, 2018). The campaign, being run in collaboration with the ICN and the WHO and supported by the Burdett Trust, sets out several ambitious objectives, one of which is more nurses in education and employment.

Although nurses and midwives constitute more than 50% of the health workforce in many countries and are critical to the delivery of essential health services and central to strengthening the health system, they are primarily a female-dominated profession. Indeed, nursing is still perceived in many quarters as 'women's work'. Although in the UK and the US men comprise roughly half of the population, they represent around only 10% of the nursing workforce (11% in the UK according to the NMC; 9.6% in the US according to the US Census Bureau, 2013) and this figure has not changed since we three authors entered nursing. Interestingly, in the UK of the 35,720 midwives on the NMC register, only 108 are male. On the other hand, men in nursing have long dominated the upper echelons of management (NHS digital, 2018).

An early report on men in nursing (Brown & Stones, 1973) commissioned by the Department of Health in the United Kingdom using established measures of personality and

intelligence showed that men in nursing scored higher in intelligence tests than the general population but that they also scored higher on psychopathy, extraversion and a tendency to lie. Whether or not this remains the case it is known that men are disproportionately represented in professional conduct referrals to the Nursing and Midwifery Council the United Kingdom (Dean, 2016).

The numbers of men in nursing remain low despite efforts to attract them into the profession. Addressing this disparity is important if the health care workforce is to reflect the diversity of the general population issue, especially in the context of today's changing sociocultural and health care landscapes.

Yet, a millennia ago it was men serving under monastic orders or in the military who provided care for the poor, sick or injured and it has been reported that the first nursing school in the world started as far back as 250 BC in India and included men only (Ross, 2017). Although under-represented in nursing, men continue to demonstrate this caring commitment to those who are in need.

Men appear to view nursing as a worthwhile career, but they perceive a strong societal link between nursing and femininity which serves as a deterrent. Importantly, male student nurses appear less likely to complete their programmes than female students. The situation has not always been helped by professional bodies, for example, the Royal College of Nursing of the United Kingdom who only agreed to permit men to join them in 1960 (Ford, 2019).

There is an urgent need to address the under-representation of men in nursing

In recent years there has been growing recognition of the problem and of efforts to address it, with recruitment drives. Recommendations include a positive rebranding of nursing at a national level that is gender-neutral; education beginning early (pre-school and in primary schools); high profile examples of men in nursing to serve as role models at a national and local level and provide outreach; and unconscious bias training (NHS Education for Scotland, 2018). However, when Coventry University (2017) in the United Kingdom tried to incentivise male entry into their nursing programme with a specifically targeted bursary, this proved controversial, for example, to readers of the *Nursing Standard* (2017).

Further research is needed to understand the reasons for the higher attrition rates among male nursing students; to understand the reality of nursing for men; and explore the impact of a more gender balanced workforce.

If nursing is to realise its true potential and act to maximise the impact that nurses have on improving health, then we need more men

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