

Addressing staffing shortages: benefits and challenges of employing newly registered nurses in general practice settings

Abstract

The NHS in the UK faces a critical shortage of general practice nurses (GPNs), projected to worsen significantly by 2030, threatening the sustainability of primary care services. Contributing factors include rising appointment volumes and patient registrations, alongside high stress levels and inadequate benefits for GPNs compared to secondary care nurses. A proposed solution is the 'growing your own' approach, employing newly registered nurses (NRNs) to address the shortfall. This strategy offers benefits, such as aligning the workforce with practice needs and introducing new knowledge, but presents challenges, including the extensive support and preceptorship NRNs require, which strains existing resources and risks increasing staff burnout. Structured preceptorship programs and phased integration are recommended to support NRNs gradually while also addressing the immediate need for experienced nurses who can handle complex patient needs.

Introduction

The National Health Service (NHS) in the UK is confronting a severe shortage of general practice nurses (GPNs), projected to intensify in the coming years (Mitchell 2022). Current estimates indicate a shortfall of approximately 1,700 full-time equivalent (FTE) practice nurses in 2021/2022, which could escalate to 6,400 FTE by 2030/31. In more pessimistic scenarios, this shortfall could reach 10,100 FTE (The Health Foundation, 2022). This crisis threatens the sustainability of primary care, the cornerstone of the NHS, which delivers over 90% of healthcare services (Health and Social Care Committee).

The challenges facing general practice are varied. Appointment volumes have surged from 23.8 million in June 2019 to 25.9 million in June 2022, an 8.9% increase, excluding COVID-19 vaccination appointments. Simultaneously, patient registrations with GPs grew from 59.9 million in July 2019 to 61.8 million in July 2022, a 3.2% rise (NHS Digital, 2022).

Hunter (2022) highlights the substantial difficulties GPNs face, including high stress and anxiety levels due to feeling invisible and overburdened. Furthermore, GPNs lack the benefits enjoyed by secondary care nurses under the NHS Agenda for Change contract, such as maternity pay, sick pay, and educational opportunities (Oxtoby and Corneek 2024).

Educational and Support Needs

In addressing the shortage of general practice nurses (GPNs), the 'grow your own' approach is a promising strategy that focuses on increasing student and trainee placements within general practice settings. Research has shown that NRNs who have had exposure to general practice during their training are more likely to apply for and stay in GPN roles (Hunter 2022). Initiatives such as apprenticeship schemes and enhanced student placements in GP settings can provide valuable hands-on experience, which is critical for preparing nurses for the specific demands of general practice.

The GPN 10-Point Plan by NHS England outlines several measures to support this approach, including expanding university and vocational training programs specifically for GPNs. This plan aims to increase the number of NRNs entering general practice by offering structured placements and mentorship opportunities during their training. Additionally, the introduction of fellowship programs

for NRNs is a strategic effort to provide ongoing support and professional development, thereby facilitating smoother transitions into practice roles (NHSE 2023).

However, while initiatives like the Quality Network for Integrated Care (QNI) ARRS scheme have shown positive impacts on workload distribution, it is important to acknowledge that these roles have also led to an increased supervisory burden on experienced GPNs. According to the QNI ARRS report, experienced GPNs often shoulder the additional responsibility of supervising new roles, which can further strain their already high workloads (QNI 2024). Addressing this issue requires a nuanced approach that balances the benefits of new roles with the need to manage the increased supervisory demands on current staff.

Implementing these initiatives can help build a pipeline of skilled GPNs who are familiar with the unique challenges of primary care. However, barriers to the effectiveness of these programs, such as geographic disparities and funding limitations, must be addressed to maximise their impact. A comprehensive review of these barriers, coupled with proposed solutions to enhance accessibility and support, is essential for ensuring that these strategies achieve their intended outcomes and contribute to a sustainable GPN workforce.

Role of Advanced Nurse Practitioners (ANPs)

Advanced Nurse Practitioners (ANPs) could mitigate these pressures by coordinating care and leading teams within general practice (Strachan et al. 2022). ANPs possess the autonomy to manage patient care holistically, which is crucial in addressing the complex and growing needs of patients (Mitchell, 2022). This article explores the potential of 'growing your own' GPNs as a solution to this increasing problem, examining the benefits and challenges of this approach.

Challenges with Newly Registered Nurses (NRNs)

Increasing staff numbers through the employment of newly registered nurses is a potential solution but comes with significant challenges (Mitchell 2022). The current climate demands experienced nurses who can immediately address complex patient needs and high workloads. Newly registered nurses often require extensive support and preceptorship to transition successfully into their roles (Smythe and Carter 2022). This preceptorship period can place additional strain on already overstretched resources within general practices (Lima and Alzyood 2024). According to Mintzberg's concept of 'Seeing behind,' relying on NRNs as an immediate fix may not be effective due to the significant time investment required for them to develop the necessary competencies and confidence (Mintzberg, 2003).

The immediate pressure to meet patient demand could risk current staff burnout (Gemine et al 2021). General practices are already facing high levels of stress and workload, which could be exacerbated by the need to support NRNs. The decision to employ NRNs often appears driven by cost-effectiveness, as newly registered nurses typically command lower salaries compared to their more experienced counterparts. However, this approach can be short-sighted. Without a thorough analysis of the skills and experience required to maintain high-quality patient care, this strategy may fail to address the underlying issues effectively. Zamanzadeh et al (2015) emphasise the importance of a holistic approach to decision-making that considers external environmental factors, organisational dynamics, and individual capabilities. They argue that effective staffing solutions must account for these multiple dimensions to address the complexity of staffing shortages comprehensively.

Furthermore, the presence of NRNs in a practice setting can inadvertently lead to a redistribution of workload rather than a reduction. Experienced nurses may need to take on additional supervisory and preceptorship roles, potentially diverting their attention from direct patient care. While integrating NRNs into the workforce is essential for long-term sustainability, it is crucial that this is balanced with the immediate need for experienced nurses who can provide high-level care without extensive oversight.

Enhancing Preceptorship and Support Strategies

While NRNs undoubtedly benefit from the guidance of experienced colleagues, employing an 'experienced nurse' does not eliminate the need for preceptorship programs. The pressure to provide preceptorship while simultaneously delivering patient care remains, as experienced GPNs must still support the professional development of new nurses. Given the current shortage of experienced GPNs, this remains a significant challenge. Integrated Care Systems (ICS) and Primary Care Networks (PCNs) have responded by appointing Professional Nurse Advocates and legacy nurses to support new and less experienced GPN teams. These roles are crucial in providing the necessary mentorship and oversight, thereby alleviating some of the pressures on existing staff.

An evaluation of the impact of Professional Nurse Advocates and legacy nurses in supporting NRNs would provide valuable insights. Although literature on their effectiveness is still emerging, these roles represent a strategic effort to enhance the integration and retention of NRNs within general practice. By offering structured support and dedicated mentorship, these positions help bridge the gap between educational programs and the practical demands of patient care, ensuring that new GPNs are well-prepared and confident in their roles.

To mitigate these challenges, structured preceptorship programs and phased integration strategies should be implemented to support NRNs as they transition into their roles (Lima and Alzyood 2024). These programs should be designed to gradually increase NRNs' responsibilities, allowing them to build confidence and competence while minimizing the additional burden on existing staff.

It is also essential to consider the findings from the QNI ARRS report, which indicate that while these roles are intended to improve workload distribution, they have inadvertently increased the supervisory responsibilities of experienced GPNs. This additional burden can impact their capacity to focus on direct patient care and contribute to overall staff stress (QNI 2024). Addressing this challenge involves ensuring that support systems for experienced GPNs are robust and that their supervisory roles are effectively managed.

Specific solutions include:

Developing Clear Preceptorship Guidelines: Establishing comprehensive guidelines for preceptorship can help standardise the support provided to NRNs. This can include clear expectations for preceptors, structured training for them, and regular feedback mechanisms.

Allocating Dedicated Time for Preceptorship: Ensuring that preceptors have allocated time within their schedules specifically for mentoring NRNs can reduce the impact on their direct patient care responsibilities. This might involve adjusting workloads or hiring additional support staff.

Utilising Technology and Resources: Implementing digital tools and resources can streamline preceptorship processes. For example, online training modules, virtual mentoring sessions, and electronic tracking systems can support preceptors and NRNs.

Enhancing Support Networks: Building robust support networks within practices, including peer support groups and regular check-ins with preceptorship coordinators, can help address the challenges faced by preceptors and NRNs.

By adopting these solutions, practices can create a more sustainable and supportive environment for integrating NRNs, ultimately leading to improved retention and quality of care.

Evaluation of Existing Initiatives

While the challenges and potential solutions for addressing the GPN workforce shortage are critical, it is also important to acknowledge and evaluate the current educational and strategic initiatives that have been implemented. The GPN 10-point plan, introduced to bolster the GPN workforce, includes several measures aimed at supporting newly registered nurses (NRNs). Notably, the fellowship scheme and the expansion of university and vocational training programs provide both clinical and professional support for new GPNs. These initiatives are designed to facilitate the transition of NRNs into general practice roles, offering structured mentorship and practical experience.

Despite these efforts, barriers remain that hinder the effective implementation and accessibility of these programs for many new GPNs. Factors such as geographic disparities, limited awareness of available programs, and insufficient funding can impede the success of these initiatives. Exploring these barriers and proposing solutions to enhance accessibility would be a valuable addition to this discussion, ensuring that more NRNs can benefit from the support structures in place and contribute to alleviating the GPN workforce shortage.

Strategic Interventions and Support Roles

Addressing the GPN shortage also involves a strategic approach to supporting NRNs both during and after their initial training. The Quality Network for Integrated Care (QNI) highlights the importance of induction programs specifically designed for nurses new to general practice. These programs provide targeted support and resources to help NRNs acclimate to the demands of general practice, bridging the gap between their educational experiences and practical responsibilities.

Furthermore, initiatives such as the Advanced Roles in Primary Care (ARRS) scheme have been shown to positively impact GPNs by offering additional roles and support structures. These roles can help distribute the workload more effectively and provide NRNs with the guidance needed to develop their skills and confidence in a supportive environment (QNI 2024).

Evaluating the effectiveness of these support structures is crucial for refining strategies and ensuring that they meet the needs of new GPNs. Research into the impact of induction programs and ARRS roles on NRNs' integration and retention can provide valuable insights into how these initiatives contribute to workforce stability and quality of care.

Disadvantages of NRNs/New to Practice Nursing

NRNs come with inherent disadvantages that can impact the efficiency and quality of care within general practice settings. One of the primary challenges is the extensive preceptorship and support required for NRNs to function autonomously. A study by the King's Fund (2018) highlights that NRNs often need significant mentorship and guidance during their transition from student to professional roles, which can strain the existing workforce.

The need for preceptorship means that experienced nurses must allocate a portion of their time to supervise and mentor these new entrants. This diversion of attention can lead to an increased workload for the remaining team members, potentially exacerbating stress and contributing to burnout. The Health Foundation (2020) reports that the additional responsibilities placed on

seasoned nurses to train and oversee NRNs can diminish their capacity to manage their regular patient loads effectively.

Furthermore, focusing on integrating NRNs can sometimes overshadow the necessity to replace the lost knowledge and skills of experienced nurses who leave the workforce. Experienced nurses often possess specialised skills and in-depth knowledge critical for managing complex patient cases and providing high-quality care. According to a report by the Royal College of Nursing (2022), the loss of experienced nurses without adequate replacement can lead to gaps in care delivery, particularly in specialised areas such as chronic disease management, palliative care, and advanced clinical decision-making.

The additional burden on the remaining team members to provide preceptorship and support can also lead to decreased job satisfaction and morale (Hong and Yoon 2021). The King's Fund (2020) suggests that increased workloads and the stress of additional responsibilities are significant factors contributing to nurse turnover rates. High turnover rates further compound staffing shortages, creating a vicious cycle that undermines the stability and effectiveness of the nursing team.

Moreover, the Royal College of Nursing (2021) emphasises that integrating NRNs must be carefully managed to ensure it does not compromise patient care. The need for ongoing training and supervision means that NRNs may not be immediately capable of handling the full spectrum of responsibilities expected in a busy general practice. This can lead to longer patient wait times, potential delays in treatment, and a possible decline in the quality of care provided.

To mitigate these disadvantages, it is crucial to implement structured mentorship programs that offer clear guidance and support for NRNs. These programs should be designed to gradually increase the responsibilities of NRNs, allowing them to build confidence and competence without overwhelming the existing staff. Additionally, ensuring a balanced mix of experienced and novice nurses can help maintain a high standard of care while fostering the professional growth of NRNs (Lima and Alzyood 2024).

Advantages of NRNs/New to Practice Nursing

Despite the challenges, employing NRNs offers several significant advantages. One of the foremost benefits is the opportunity to shape and develop new talent within the practice. The NHS Workforce Report (2020) notes that integrating NRNs into the team helps inculcate the practice's values and procedures from the outset, ensuring a cohesive and consistent approach to patient care.

By incorporating NRNs, practices can develop a tailored skill set within their teams (Watson et al., 2020). Newly registered nurses are often more adaptable and open to learning new methods and technologies, which can be advantageous in an ever-evolving healthcare landscape. The King's Fund (2020) highlights that NRNs bring fresh perspectives and are typically familiar with recent advancements in nursing education and practice. This infusion of new knowledge and contemporary practices can enhance the overall quality of care provided.

Additionally, fostering a culture of continuous learning and professional development is a significant advantage of employing NRNs. These nurses are usually eager to further their education and professional skills, contributing to a more dynamic and innovative work environment. The Health Foundation (2020) reports that ongoing education and development opportunities are crucial for maintaining high levels of job satisfaction and retention among nurses. By investing in the professional growth of NRNs, practices can build a more resilient and motivated workforce.

Moreover, the inclusion of NRNs helps address long-term workforce sustainability. As these new nurses gain experience and advance in their careers, they can gradually take on more complex roles and responsibilities. This progression ensures a steady pipeline of skilled nurses ready to step into senior positions as needed. The Royal College of Nursing (2021) underscores the importance of supporting career progression to mitigate the effects of nurse shortages and maintain a stable workforce.

Employing NRNs also offers the potential for innovation in practice. Trained with the latest evidence-based practices, NRNs can introduce new ideas and improvements to patient care processes. According to the King's Fund (2018), integrating new graduates can drive quality improvements and foster a culture of innovation, ultimately benefiting patient outcomes.

In conclusion, while employing NRNs presents challenges, the advantages are substantial. Practices that invest in NRNs can develop a tailored, skilled workforce, foster continuous professional development, and ensure long-term sustainability and innovation in patient care. By carefully managing the integration of NRNs, practices can leverage their potential to enhance the overall quality and effectiveness of healthcare delivery.

Solutions to Staff Shortages

One potential solution to the general practice nursing shortage is to appoint a registered nurse with experience in a general practice (GP) setting. This approach can provide immediate relief by replacing lost skills in critical areas such as diabetes management, cervical cytology, and respiratory care. According to the Royal College of Nursing (2022), experienced nurses bring a wealth of knowledge and specialised skills essential for managing complex patient needs efficiently.

Integrating an experienced nurse into the team helps maintain a high standard of care without the extensive preceptorship required for newly registered nurses (NRNs) (NMC, 2023). This infusion of expertise can alleviate some of the pressures on existing staff, who may be struggling to cover gaps left by departing colleagues. The Health Foundation (2020) highlights that experienced nurses are often better equipped to handle high patient volumes and complex cases, enhancing overall practice efficiency and patient satisfaction.

While this approach addresses immediate needs, long-term staffing strategies must also be considered. Developing the skills and experience of the current nursing team is crucial for creating a sustainable and resilient workforce (NHS England, 2023). Continuous professional development and training programs are essential for retaining skilled nurses and ensuring career advancement. The King's Fund (2020) emphasises the importance of investing in ongoing education to build a workforce capable of adapting to future healthcare challenges.

A strategic plan that combines the appointment of experienced nurses with the development of current staff is critical. Conducting a SWOT analysis—assessing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats—can be an effective tool for comprehensive strategic planning (Gurel, 2017). This analysis ensures that decision-making considers all relevant factors and stakeholder input. Clegg et al. (2011) argue that addressing complex problems requires evaluating multiple solutions and incorporating diverse perspectives to find the most effective approach.

Engaging all stakeholders in the decision-making process helps ensure that strategies are well-rounded and reflect the needs and insights of those directly affected. The King's Fund (2018) suggests that practices involving their staff in strategic planning are more likely to create a supportive and effective work environment.

In summary, appointing a registered nurse with experience in a GP setting can offer immediate relief from staffing shortages by replacing lost skills and knowledge. However, it is equally important to invest in the development of the current nursing team to ensure long-term sustainability and resilience. By conducting a thorough SWOT analysis and involving all stakeholders in strategic planning, practices can effectively address the complex issue of nursing shortages and enhance the quality of care provided.

Conclusion

The NHS is confronting a severe shortage of general practice nurses (GPNs), with forecasts predicting a shortfall of 6,400 to 10,100 full-time equivalent (FTE) nurses by 2030/31. Addressing this issue necessitates a multifaceted strategy: employing experienced nurses to manage immediate needs, investing in newly registered nurses (NRNs) for future growth, and enhancing the skills of the current workforce.

Experienced nurses play a crucial role in this strategy by bringing valuable knowledge and skills to high-demand areas, helping to ease current pressures on general practices. They also provide mentorship, which is essential for maintaining high standards of care.

Investing in NRNs offers long-term advantages by developing a new generation of GPNs. With proper support through mentorship and professional development, these new nurses can become effective and skilled team members. It's essential, however, to balance this investment with the need for experienced practitioners who can deliver high-quality care with minimal supervision.

Strategic planning should involve thorough analysis and input from all stakeholders to ensure sustainable and effective solutions. Tools like SWOT analysis can help identify key factors affecting the organisation, and stakeholder engagement can lead to more innovative and effective strategies.

By adopting a comprehensive approach and investing in the professional growth of its nursing staff, the NHS can address the staffing crisis and maintain high-quality care. This involves creating career advancement opportunities for current staff, which aids in retaining experienced nurses and ensuring the transfer of knowledge within the team. Ultimately, a combination of experienced and new nurses, along with strategic planning and development, will help the NHS build a resilient and capable workforce to meet future challenges.

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