Viewed by some as a backwater, only attracting those in the twilight of their career, the nurse’s role on specialist health helplines is often misunderstood and undervalued. A new framework, written by senior staff at charities that employ information nurses, is set to challenge these unwarranted perceptions. ‘It dignifies what we’re doing,’ says Cancer Research UK head information nurse Martin Ledwick, who manages a team of eight. ‘And it gives nurses an idea of what we expect from them.’

Being a good communicator is at the heart of information nursing, Mr Ledwick says. ‘Nurses are dealing with a wide range of understanding,’ he says. ‘They are used to talking and explaining difficult concepts in plain English. In the NHS, nurses have limited time to spend talking to their patients, but that’s all we do. That’s what we’re about and we learn to do it very effectively.’

Mr Ledwick meets regularly with senior nursing colleagues at Macmillan Cancer Support, the National Osteoporosis Society and Prostate Cancer UK. ‘We realised that our role was not understood well, especially the level of expertise we expect, with the skills, experience and competencies nurses need,’ he says. ‘This is a proper job, with a specific skill set.’

The framework will include the background and context of information and support service nursing, as well as underlying principles and practice standards. The hope is that it may eventually form the basis of an educational programme for a growing specialism.

Enhanced skills
Nurses who decide to return to clinical roles bring these enhanced communication skills with them, he says. When one former colleague returned to work in palliative care, she found that staff actively sought her help when they faced emotionally challenging conversations with patients and loved ones. ‘She had spent a couple of years where most of her work involved having difficult conversations with people,’ he says. ‘It formed so much of her day-to-day job that they were not a problem for her.’
Potential employers may underestimate the skills nurses acquire when working in information services. ‘When nurses apply in the NHS and are shortlisted, often those interviewing them don’t understand they have developed encyclopaedic knowledge of their subject,’ says Mr Ledwick. ‘It comes as a real surprise that they have nurses who may not have done clinical care for a few years, but whose knowledge is off the scale. When you’re on the wards, you may be focused on one aspect of a disease and have good knowledge of it, but we have to be able to answer a whole range of queries.’

Having worked in this sector for the past 20 years, Mr Ledwick admits that initially he thought he would miss hands-on patient care. ‘But the interactions over the phone can be so intense that I feel I’ve had a connection with a patient,’ he says.

Speak freely
‘I’m asked questions that I never would have been on the wards. The anonymity frees people up, and a whole level of embarrassment goes out of the equation. It’s far more satisfying than I’d imagined.’

Having only joined Prostate Cancer UK’s team of 11 specialist nurses in September last year, Emma Craske’s experience is similar. ‘Before I started, I expected the calls to be superficial, but that’s not the case at all. Callers find the anonymity enables them to be frank about their concerns and anxieties,’ says Ms Craske, who works three days a week. ‘With us, people have the freedom to ask questions and express emotion.’

Ms Craske also thought she would miss face-to-face contact with patients. ‘But the phone calls are so deeply personal and emotional that I have a sense of meeting a real need for people,’ she says.

She has worked in various cancer nursing roles over the past 25 years, always in the NHS. ‘I get enormous job satisfaction from empowering the person with information and support,’ she says. ‘You can hear the relief in their voice when they feel they understand and are better equipped to make decisions and ask the right questions.’

Thinking of working on a helpline?
» ‘Look beyond the NHS,’ says Martin Ledwick. ‘Most of these kinds of jobs are outside it.’ He advises contacting charities in your specialist area to see if they have any vacancies.

» Develop a passion for the cause and a collaborative spirit. ‘You need a genuine interest and a willingness to become involved in other aspects of the organisation’s work,’ says Emma Craske, who has also reviewed literature and taken part in filming since joining Prostate Cancer last year.

» Good communication skills are paramount. ‘You need an enquiring mind; wanting to find answers has really got to ring your bell,’ says Mr Ledwick. ‘You also need the confidence to say when you don’t know. There’s nothing wrong with not knowing everything. We have the skills to find out information and make judgements about its quality.’

Empowering callers
Subjects range from worries about symptoms to what test results mean, the pros and cons of various treatment options and potential side effects. ‘Sometimes the person will have received a tidal wave of information at the clinic and not have understood a lot of it,’ she says. ‘We try to fill the holes.’

In particular, she’s found that her listening skills have improved, as there are no visual clues. Instead she has had to find new ways to clarify callers’ comprehension, including listening carefully to their responses to see if she can hear doubt.

‘I get enormous job satisfaction from empowering the person with information and support,’ she says. ‘You can hear the relief in their voice when they feel they understand and are better equipped to make decisions and ask the right questions.’

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