District nursing needs to be thrown a lifeline

Greater investment would ensure that front-line staff are not crushed by the weight of demand

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There is a profound and growing gap between capacity and demand in district nursing, jeopardising the quality of patient care.

It is notoriously difficult to measure activity and track workforce trends in community health services, but available sources paint a worrying picture of declining community nurse numbers with a particularly dramatic drop among senior district nurses.

Meanwhile, in the context of a service that plays a key role in caring for frail, older people and those with chronic conditions, it is clear that demand has risen, even if it isn’t possible to precisely track the change.

Over the last year, The King’s Fund has conducted research to develop a more detailed understanding of pressures facing district nursing, and what this means for its staff and the patients who rely on them.

It found services struggling to cope with a substantial increase in the number of patients requiring care, and increasing complexity and intensity of the work. These pressures were compounded by significant workforce challenges, with issues in recruitment, retention, staff turnover and skill-mix.

Strategies in place

Services have adopted a range of measures in response in an attempt to sustain efficiency such as greater use of technology, evidence-based clinical pathways, working closely with other local health, social care and voluntary sector services, and ensuring appropriate triage of referrals by senior staff.

Worryingly, there were also examples of short-term survival strategies that could have a negative effect on quality of care. These include increasing reliance on agency staff and cutting back non-clinical activities that promote and assure quality, such as staff training and joint visits.

Despite efforts to improve efficiency and the huge commitment of staff, who routinely work extra unpaid hours, quality of care appears to be suffering: we found examples of an increasingly task-focused approach, reductions in preventive care and a lack of continuity.

This is having a deeply negative effect on staff wellbeing; we heard of staff being ‘exhausted’, ‘broken’ and ‘on their knees’.

This situation has arisen despite the long-held policy aim of offering more care closer to home. But to keep pace with rising demand – and deliver high quality and effective care – surely we need more staff, not fewer?

Recognising the importance of services

A crucial first step in addressing these issues is for leaders to recognise the vital importance of community services. With the NHS under unprecedented financial pressure, the temptation will be to renew the focus on hospitals to bring down deficits and improve performance against high-profile targets.

But this is counter-productive. Urgent attention is needed to reverse the downward trend in staff numbers, and community services must be central to new care models and sustainability and transformation plans.

In the meantime, what can be done at the front line? A key finding from the research was the strong alignment between the views of nurses and patients about the components of ‘good’ district nursing.

Based on this consensus, the King’s Fund has developed a framework, which can be used by staff to reflect on local practice, and it is hoped this offers a useful resource for local services to assess and improve the quality of care they provide.

In addition, managers should ensure that activities designed to support staff – such as training, management and clinical supervision – are protected wherever possible.

District nursing services are a lifeline for many people; to protect the quality of this care, it is essential to also protect the wellbeing of the staff we rely on to deliver it.

Read the King’s Fund report at tinyurl.com/zg9u7j8