Nursing associates: a return to state enrolled nurses?

Plan for unregulated support role seen as a way to obtain ‘nursing skills on the cheap’, reports Clare Lomas

AT THE end of last year, the government announced it would introduce a new nursing support role to help bridge the gap between healthcare support workers and registered nurses.

The new nursing associate role, expected to be an unregulated band 4 position, will require two years of on-the-job training that will lead to a foundation degree. With an additional two years of study, this can then be converted into a full nursing degree, thereby creating a new route into the profession.

The Department of Health is working with Health Education England (HEE) to create the role and, subject to consultation, the scheme will be trialled at 30 trusts across England this year, with 1,000 nursing associates being trained by the start of 2017.

HEE director of nursing Lisa Bayliss-Pratt says: ‘The development of this new role has the potential to transform the nursing and care workforce.

“We want to create a career pathway with progression opportunities to enable job satisfaction for those who want to develop themselves in this important profession.’

The role’s development is backed by chief nursing officer for England Jane Cummings, who says health and care assistants ‘should be given the opportunity to develop’.

“This new role will provide a valuable addition by creating a bridge between senior health and care assistants and registered nurses. It will also provide additional support in meeting the needs of patients.”

Career prospects
In October, the RCN rejected NHS England’s call for the creation of a nursing associate role because it resembled the state enrolled nurse role, which offered few career prospects and was phased out in the 1990s.

But RCN head of policy Howard Catton welcomes the title ‘nursing associate’, saying it suggests someone who is intended to support rather than replace nurses, and because the role is clearly part of a career pathway.

RCN general secretary Janet Davies adds: ‘This is welcome recognition of the value of healthcare assistants and an initiative that will allow them to develop their skills.

‘The role will assist graduate nurses and give a route into the profession to people who would otherwise have been denied the opportunity.

‘We will be responding in full to the consultation to ensure that the role is fully funded without detracting from the wider workforce, and above all is an asset to care and to patients.’

The need to develop a nursing role that would ‘sit between care assistant and registered nurse’ was identified by Lord Willis of Knaresborough in his Shape of Caring review into nurse education, published in March.

He said staff taking up the role could provide ‘more traditional hands-on care’. However, in a letter to the Times newspaper last December, a group of prominent nurse leaders criticised the plan, saying it ‘fails to recognise the functions and value of registered nurses’ and could lead to an increase in avoidable patient deaths.

The letter had been signed by patient representatives, nurse academics and former directors of nursing, including professor of healthcare and workforce modelling at London South Bank University Alison Leary, Barchester Healthcare director of quality and clinical governance Trish Morris-Thompson and Patients Association chief executive Katherine Murphy.

Members of the group say that the planned role ‘makes a false distinction between clinical skills and “hands-on” care requiring less knowledge’, and ignores research evidence showing better outcomes and lower mortality rates when registered nurses care for patients.

‘Every 10% increase in degree-educated nurses is associated with a 7% lower mortality rate after common surgery. Hence, increasing the number of lower skilled staff could increase the number of unnecessary deaths,’ the group suggested.
Nursing consultant and chair of the Safe Staffing Alliance Susan Osborne, who also signed the letter, says: ‘Giving the work of nurses to those who are not fully qualified is a nonsense and simply does not address the main problem of a lack of nurses on wards.’

Regulation
At present, it is understood that the nursing associate role will be unregulated. Nursing and Midwifery Council chief executive Jackie Smith says that, although the role is an ‘important development for the nursing profession’, whether or not it should be regulated requires consideration.

‘The starting point for any new role in health care has to be its contribution to improving patient safety and quality,’ she says. ‘While we support widening access into the nursing profession, it is important that any new routes into the profession have the same robust approach that the university degree route provides.’

NHS Employers chief executive Danny Mortimer says: ‘We know that many trusts have already developed innovative associate practitioner roles and their experience will be a valuable resource as this new initiative is considered.

‘However, it is important not to pre-empt decisions about these roles until the consultation has taken place. We will seek the views of employers on training for, and deployment of, the proposed role during the months to come.’

Worcestershire Acute NHS Trust quality and governance manager and former enrolled nurse Jane Brown says: ‘Many nurses did the state enrolled nurse training and provide a great service for patients. The nursing associate role must be planned carefully, but it could be a step forward for nursing and patients.’

However, former nursing student Grant Byrne says: ‘The nursing associate role is a rehash of old ideas. It is not about helping healthcare assistants to get a leg up; it is about getting nursing skills on the cheap. Patients need more nurses, not a cut-price knock-off.’

No date for the consultation had been set at the time of going to press.

THE VALUE of nursing leadership is highlighted in the RCN centenary exhibition, which opened last month at the college’s London headquarters.

Hosted by the RCN Library and Heritage Centre, the exhibition, entitled The Voice of Nursing: Celebrating 100 Years of the RCN, showcases the history of the UK’s largest nursing union by leading visitors through a century of the profession.

Founded during the first world war, the RCN was the first organisation to secure professional status for nurses. It has been a pioneer in training and education, and supporting the rights of female workers, ever since.

The exhibition has been drawn from the RCN’s unique collections and includes sections on history, nursing education and specialties. Displays also explore the representations of nursing in fiction and other popular culture.

A hundred years of nursing history and testimony is on display at the RCN’s exhibition in London, writes Layla Haidrani

**Oral history**
Nurses’ experiences and testimonies are presented throughout the exhibition in the forms of oral histories, diaries, letters and artefacts.

Patricia McCormick, for example, describes the experience of being a ward manager:

> To get someone to come onto our ward following emergency surgery, look after them and see their health improved during their time with us, and then to see them walk into a room six months later and smile at me; it’s an unbelievable feeling.

Shane Williams explains what is important to him about being a nurse manager: ‘Another day in charge of a critical care unit managing a team of staff, with patient safety always our number one priority.’

He adds: ‘Being a manager is about looking after your team, making sure they feel supported and relieving them for their rest breaks throughout a 12-hour shift.’

These are among the testimonies used to describe the profession’s breadth and scope, from children’s nursing to caring for patients in custody.

Today, the RCN represents more than 440,000 nursing staff and students working in the public, private and voluntary sectors.

Through lobbying government and other bodies across the UK, the college also campaigns for better conditions in nursing so that healthcare professionals can improve patient care.

General secretary Janet Davies says: ‘Reaching our centenary is incredibly exciting and we look forward to celebrating this milestone with people across the country over the course of 2016.

‘This special exhibition uncovers how the RCN has developed from a small women’s organisation to the voice of the nursing profession.’

Layla Haidrani is RCNi editorial assistant

**Left:** some of the historical nursing instruments on display at the college’s exhibition

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**Find out more**

The Voice of Nursing: Celebrating 100 Years of the RCN is being held at the RCN Library and Heritage Centre, 20 Cavendish Square, London W1G 0RN. The exhibition is free and open to members and the general public. For information, go to www.rcn.org.uk/about-us/centenary/exhibition, and to see the centenary film, visit tinyurl.com/h7nq5j4