Get on the skills escalator

The government plans to smooth the career paths of NHS staff with a new training initiative. A similar scheme for nurses has just started at the North Bristol NHS Trust.

By Christian Duffin

AT LAST year's NHS Confederation conference the organisation's policy director raised a few eyebrows when he suggested that cleaners should be able to train to become consultants.

Trading a scrubbing brush for a scalpel wouldn't happen overnight, said Andrew Foster - now the Department of Health's director of human resources - but it would be the long-term goal of a 'skills escalator,' a training scheme for all staff to move gradually up the NHS career ladder.

His recommendations were included in the NHS Plan and last week the government announced its ideas for an NHS university, which will give distance learning courses in the same way as the Open University. Some training, in areas such as communication skills and ethics, will be given to all staff, but there will also be tailor-made modules. These include everything from maths and literacy to the skills needed to become a medical or nursing consultant.

Fewer obstacles

The theory is that recruitment and retention will be enhanced if there are clear career pathways and fewer obstacles for those who have done the appropriate training. North Bristol NHS Trust has already introduced a similar scheme within nursing. The Nursing and Midwifery Professional Development Pathway allows a progression from grade D right through to consultant nurse level. It is being piloted in the medical directorate. Some training, in areas such as communication skills and ethics, will be given to all staff, but there will also be tailor-made modules. These include everything from maths and literacy to the skills needed to become a medical or nursing consultant.

Bristol's scheme has five sections that can be intertwined or remain distinct. Nurses design their paths around their individual needs. Stage one is for grade D nurses, who develop a career plan with a clinical tutor before doing three six-month placements alongside mentor training and a clinical course. After 18 months, nurses can either stay in stage one or compete for a stage two post on grade E, provided they have acquired the necessary competencies. Stage two features three six-month placements and clinical training.

To join stage three - for senior staff nurses or junior sisters - nurses have to decide on a career plan with a specific clinical branch. The stage includes two 12-month service placements designed to meet the learning needs of the nurse, plus the service needs of the trust, a leadership course, a clinically relevant course and training in research techniques.

Clinic management

Stage four, for the G grade or equivalent, develops nurses in their chosen clinical specialty. It is a five-year pathway including two years in a clinic management role, and nurses will be expected to work towards master's level practice and a master's degree. After completing stage four, nurses will be eligible to apply for posts as a consultant nurse, researcher or educationalist and start stage five, lasting three to five years and with the opportunity to study up to doctorate level.

Of nurses already signed up to the scheme, staff nurse Jill Davies says: 'It offers me the perfect opportunity to work on different wards without having to go through the hassle of continually applying for and changing jobs.'

Trust director of nursing Julie Burgess, who helped design the scheme, says: 'This is a novel pathway which may revolutionise nurse recruitment, retention, education and career planning while meeting service needs. She admits that there is no guarantee nurses will be able to move smoothly along the skills ladder, and that part-time workers may need double the time to complete some stages. 'But it does tie up the clinical and academic aspects. Before, if you had a degree, you were just seen as a nurse with an academic qualification. Now it will be part of your job.'

RCN regional officer for the south west Helen Hancox believes the scheme could stop nurses 'falling from one job to the next'. 'A good thing about it is that nurses can work at their own pace and take as long as they like, which is especially good if you're part time,' she says. 'What we're looking at, for once, is nurses having a defined career path. People entering the profession will get an idea about what's expected of them and also to know their potential. As a profession that's something we're lacking.'