Don’t knock ‘obvious’ research on staff levels

Evidence on missed care and outcomes that reinforces the need for more nurses has to be obvious to everyone

Decades of research have established beyond doubt that there is an association between registered nurse (RN) staffing levels and mortality rates. We have hypothesised, but not previously tested, that ‘missed care’ may be the reason that low RN staffing is related to patient risk of death in hospital, and that when there are fewer registered nursing staff on duty, necessary care is less likely to be completed in full.

We know that RN staffing levels are related to the incidence of care being left undone and that having more support staff does not compensate for having relatively few nurses, because their roles are different. But until now we have not known what effect missed RN care has on patient outcomes.

Our most recent research confirms that ‘missed RN care’ is related to mortality levels. After common surgical procedures, patients are more likely to die if they are in hospitals where higher levels of missed care are reported. Each 10% increase in missed care is associated with a 16% greater risk of death.

Some of the reaction to the findings recently reported in the media was less than edifying: ‘No shit Sherlock’, ‘This research is a waste of time and money’ and ‘We’ve all known this for years – it’s obvious’.

I do have some sympathy with these reactions. Sit on an understaffed ward for an hour and you soon see signs of strain and compromised care. And yet if this is so obvious, why are the findings not informing workforce policy in England?

Ongoing shortage

One in ten RN posts are vacant. What action has been taken to address this ongoing shortage? Five months ago the Department of Health announced that there was to be a 25% increase in medical student places for 2017/18 – a huge investment. But where is the corresponding commitment to the education and training of nurses?

Despite the deep and ongoing national shortage of RNs, the student intake for 2017 has fallen by an estimated 4%. And at the same time, CPD budgets have been cut by as much as 50%. The message about the value of RNs and importance to patient safety is not obvious to decision-makers. So next time you find yourself thinking ‘it’s obvious’, don’t knock the research, use it. Use it to inform the decisions that you as a nurse make about staffing, and share it with colleagues to inform their decisions about workforce.

To change things for the better we need to use the evidence, and each of us needs to take responsibility for making sure others around us ‘get it’ too. The value of nursing and the need for ‘enough nurses’ needs to be obvious, not just to health sector colleagues but to our friends, family and wider society.

Your neighbours, your local councillor and MP all need to understand the significance of the research. That nurse staffing matters. We urgently need this evidence to be translated into action. We need enough registered nurses to deliver care safely and effectively: it’s obvious.

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