The high turnover of chief nurses and why it undermines front-line staff

Many UK directors of nursing don’t stay in post long enough to hit their stride – or champion the needs of their staff

The high turnover of chief nurses in NHS organisations may translate into a lack of stable leadership and inadequate support for front-line staff, nursing experts warn.

Figures analysed by Nursing Standard show that half of all UK directors of nursing have been in post for two years or less.

Among the 248 NHS organisations in the UK that we surveyed, 51% (126) have permanent or interim chief nurses who took up their post in or after October 2017.

Struggling with demand
High turnover at senior level in NHS nursing could contribute to a lack of consistency and coherence in how front-line nurses are being supported in some organisations, argues nursing workforce expert James Buchan.

‘Some turnover at senior level is necessary and positive, where it means job moves and career promotion,’ says Professor Buchan, who is based in the health and sciences faculty at Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh.

‘But a constantly high level might be a symptom of a deeper organisational malaise.’ The figures are almost unchanged from last year, when a Nursing Standard analysis...
revealed that 52% of chief nurses (128) at organisations surveyed across the UK had taken up their post within in the previous two years, suggesting turnover was high.

RCN director of nursing, policy and practice Bronagh Scott says high turnover is a serious concern related to a combination of factors.

‘The director of nursing provides strong, professional leadership to the nursing workforce and is crucial in ensuring the profession is seen, heard and able to influence,’ she says.

‘[High turnover] undoubtedly affects the stability of the nursing workforce throughout an organisation.’

Ms Scott suggests that years of a health service struggling to meet demand, sustained financial pressures, and chronic nursing workforce shortages have left many nursing leaders feeling like they have their hands tied behind their backs.

Sense of frustration
She adds: ‘Directors of nursing are asked, and want, to deliver meaningful change, but are often left without the means to do it. It is unsurprising that some are left feeling frustrated.’

Directors of nursing who spoke to Nursing Standard emphasised the importance in this role of engaging with front-line nurses.

Croydon Health Service NHS Trust chief nurse Elaine Clancy says ‘people like to know where they are’. Too much change, such as that brought about through rapid turnover of directors, can have a detrimental effect, she says.

‘Different leaders have different styles, approaches and priorities, and that can unsettle people.’

Ms Clancy took up her post in May, in a new joint role in which she is also chief nurse for NHS Croydon Clinical Commissioning Group.

The former emergency nurse was previously deputy chief operating officer at Croydon Health Service NHS Trust and has worked for most of her 30-year career in the London borough. Ms Clancy says it is incredibly important to be visible as a leader to understand nurses’ issues and represent the nursing workforce through strategic decisions.

To this end, she spends a lot of time talking to nurses on the wards and in units, trying to build up relationships. ‘I am a nurse through and through – nursing is who and what I am – and I need to be talking to teams and seeing the issues. Staff won’t talk to you if they don’t see you and you don’t talk to them.’

A number of Croydon Health Service NHS Trust’s initiatives also work towards this goal.

Ms Clancy, along with other members of the trust’s executive team, is also involved with the First Responders’ weekly scheme, in which senior managers take a trolley with refreshments around and stop to chat with staff. She says feedback from staff has been incredibly positive.

Constant clinical contact
Claire Johnston spent 15 years as the director of nursing and people at Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust, leaving in December 2017.

She is now programme lead in north London for the Capital Nurse programme, which works to ensure London has the right number of nurses through

How to be a successful nurse leader

Claire Johnston, former director of nursing and people at Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust, says:

» Find a coach Try a friendly neighbouring director of nursing from another trust. It might lead to great joint nursing programmes

» Focus on the right things Remember that leaders do not often win popularity stakes

» ‘Well begun is half done’ So said Aristotle, and that’s a maxim for me to seize the day and get going

» Remember why you became a nurse What it meant to you then and now

Accept you will not always get it right No leader can in whatever sphere, including our politicians. But tomorrow is another wonderful day to try to succeed

Ms Johnston, pictured, says networking is critical to be effective as a leader. ‘The nursing leader community is amazingly friendly and open – and we know we need one another,’ she says.

‘These jobs can be lonely and sharing with those who understand the game you are in, because they are too, matters.’

Engaged leaders
Ms Johnston says that in her own geographical area, she sees ‘engaged’ directors of nursing and primary care leaders who are ‘constantly curious’ about what their nurses are experiencing, thinking or aspiring to do for better and safer care.

‘It unlikely there is a director of nursing now in any health and care organisation, independent or NHS trust, little or large, who is not spending at least 20% of their week with operational nurses in clinical settings,’ Ms Johnston says.

‘And they will all – as the chief nurses are in our ten trusts in north central London – be on Twitter, sharing weekly blogs and setting up chat rooms to reach out and listen.

‘If any are misunderstanding the purpose of their role or have behavioural traits which inhibit that essential passion for nursing and being able to represent their nursing workforce which the role demands, they need to be counselled out.’

With some nurse directors facing an uphill battle to realise the role profile in the current climate, the RCN’s Bronagh Scott has a message for NHS strategic and professional leaders.

Shaper focus on retention
‘We are calling on NHS England and NHS Improvement to place a much sharper focus on retaining these highly skilled directors of nursing,’ she says.

‘It is so important that nursing leaders are supported to deliver on their vision for the nursing workforce and health and care in their organisation.’

NHS England chief nurse Ruth May has long been a vocal advocate of the need to support nursing leaders and has been involved in establishing development programmes to nurture professional leadership.

Since 2016, NHS Improvement has led the Aspiring Nurse Directors Programme, which worked to identify and support the next generation of nursing leaders.

‘Once in post we ensure they as the future of nursing. Ms Carter says she makes it her business to attend career workshops offering insight into career development.

However, Ms Carter says these changes were made with support from colleagues. ‘No man is an island,’ she says, ‘I couldn’t have done what I’ve done without the collective work of my colleagues.'