A trained team should be in place in every NHS organisation ready to support staff if a colleague dies by suicide, guidance states.

The first-of-its-kind guidance calls for rapid and robust responses to the immediate need of staff following a suicide – so-called ‘postvention’, alongside cultural awareness of mental health issues.

The guidance is based on a two-year study identifying the impact on NHS staff of colleague suicide and the support individuals may need, and was produced by researchers at the universities of Surrey, Keele and Birmingham.

Between 2016 and 2019 an average of 10 people died by suicide in every 100,000 of population in England and Wales. The suicide rate among healthcare professionals is 25% higher, partly accounted for by suicide being four more times more common in female nurses than in the general population, researchers said.

How to support colleagues in distress

- Encourage them to talk about their feelings
- Let them know you care
- Empathise with them, be non-judgemental
- Encourage them to get help
- Make sure someone is with them if they are in immediate danger

Data from the Laura Hyde Foundation (LHF) also show a dramatic increase in the number of nurses attempting suicide in the past two years. Some 366 nurses are known to have tried to take their own lives in 2022, up 62% since 2020.

Researchers found existing suicide support guidance is not specific enough for the NHS, and that support has often fallen short of staff needs.

Principal investigator Ruth Riley said: ‘The hope is that by publishing this guidance, every NHS trust across the UK will have a dedicated, trained and skilled team in place to support colleagues.

‘Compassionate, targeted and timely support after a suicide not only helps NHS employees, it also protects the patients, people and communities they serve.’

Keele University GP principal professor of general practice research Carolyn Chew-Graham said: ‘When a colleague dies by suicide, it can have an impact on all members of a clinical team. This guidance should lead to the establishment of a team of staff who can respond rapidly, safely and robustly to the needs of those bereaved by a colleague’s suicide.’

Unison general secretary Christina McAnea said the guidance is a call to action. ‘Everyone must work together to break down stigma around suicide, and ensure staff receive compassionate support and enough time to grieve.’

For more advice, visit the Laura Hyde Foundation at www.laurahydefoundation.org/suicide-prevention