The ward manager is the face of the ward for most patients, and their daily presence and interaction with patients provides consistency and stability. Their knowing patients clinically and personally greatly assists with continuity of care during times when the make up of teams can change often, due to the inclusion of agency staff or a high staff turnover, for example.

**Facilitating handovers**
The ward manager can facilitate handovers, briefings and seamless integration of staff in wider teams. Given all this, and their wider-ranging responsibilities and leadership role, can we afford for them not to be supernumerary?

We are excited to be developing an RCN Wales clinical leadership programme for ward managers in the NHS and independent sector. This is for ward managers who want to strengthen and develop their leadership skills, such as emotional intelligence, conflict management, coaching styles, establishing a vision and direction.

If you are thinking about whether the role of ward manager is right for you, there has never been a more relevant time to strengthen the voice of nursing in a leadership role that directly affects patient care.

### How to create a healthy ‘speaking up’ culture

After the Letby case exposed faults in the NHS’s response to concerns, nurse managers must ensure staff can speak up.

In the wake of the Lucy Letby case, which has shocked the profession and the nation, there has never been a more pressing time to encourage staff to speak up about their concerns. Even before this, an expert analysis by the National Guardian’s Office of the most recent NHS Staff Survey showed that workers’ confidence to speak up about concerns in the workplace has declined for the second year in a row.

Nurse managers have a critical role in trying to reverse this trend.

**Why is it important to ensure your workplace has a healthy speaking-up culture and what does that look like?**

Such a culture helps improve safety for patients and fellow workers, according to guidance for NHS leaders. This kind of culture improves people’s confidence to raise issues and can improve staff retention and morale. Staff will be happier in a workplace that wants to deal with problems and learn from them.

The Nursing and Midwifery Council code of conduct says nurses have a duty to raise concerns if they believe there is a risk to patient safety. National guardian for the NHS Jayne Chidgey-Clark says a healthy speaking-up culture is one where people can speak up and are thanked.

### Having time to lead as a ward manager: what are the benefits for patients?

Some of the benefits of ward managers being free to lead their teams, according to the RCN project findings, include:

- **Happier staff, happier patients** It is proven that increased emotional well-being in staff (being well-rested, motivated and happy in their work) correlates to better patient care and better working relationships

- **Fewer incidents** By allowing the ward manager to manage data, plan, delegate and anticipate, there is far less opportunity for missed details and mistakes

- **Quicker discharge rates** Better overall patient journey and so potentially increased space for patients waiting for treatment

- **Implementing existing legislation** Ward managers use their professional judgement to determine the number of staff and the skill mix required for the setting and can monitor if, for example, government standards are being met

- **Assisting Upskilling, role modelling and supporting career development for their colleagues**
listened to, with appropriate action taken and feedback given.

RCN learning and development professional lead Christine McKenzie says: ‘It matters because it relates to the workforce and that is our biggest investment. It also relates to outcomes for patients. When you speak up and out, you reduce the potential for harm to patients or service users and also complaints against staff.’

What are some of the barriers to speaking up?
Fear of reprisal, blame and shame, says Ms McKenzie.

‘Speaking up can feel like a risky thing to do if you work in an unsupportive organisation,’ adds Dr Chidgey-Clark. ‘In the latest Freedom to Speak Up guardian survey, the main barriers perceived are the fear of detriment for speaking up (66%) or a concern that nothing will be done (67%).’

How is it possible to set the tone for a speaking-up culture?
Set the tone as a manager by your actions. Demonstrate that you are listening when people speak to you, follow up on what they’ve said, and let them know what actions you have taken, explains Dr Chidgey-Clark. Try to create a culture of psychological safety where staff feel able to discuss and raise concerns without fear.

Dr Chidgey-Clarke says: ‘Even if you can’t tell staff details for confidential reasons, you can still let them know that their concerns have been considered. “You said, we did” communications – for example, boards, newsletters, emails or blogs on the intranet – are a great way to demonstrate that speaking up can make a difference.’

Northumbria Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust Freedom to Speak Up guardian Kirsty Dickson says: ‘A lot of it is the person’s own perception and their fears about what might happen. People move around and might have had an experience with one organisation and that might influence whether or not they speak up again.

‘We try to encourage people to do the right thing and give them confidence in that.’

How do you communicate to your team about speaking up?
Talk openly about speaking up, invite people to speak to you but also suggest they can speak to others if they feel uncomfortable talking to you, says Dr Chidgey-Clark. Tell stories about occasions when you spoke up, and celebrate when people raise things with you, she says.

Ms Dickson says: ‘It’s making sure the communications are appropriate and effective, case by case.

‘Speaking up can feel like a risky thing to do if you work in an unsupportive organisation’
Jayne Chidgey-Clark, national guardian for the NHS

‘In that way, it opens up a lot of communication channels between staff-side groups, networks, managers, occupational health and human resources. It makes sure there is openness and transparency between services and between the people who are required to handle the concerns.’

Try to ensure there is compassionate and inclusive leadership, adds Ms McKenzie. People have to be held to account, but there should not be a culture of blame.

What is the best way to respond to people who do speak up?
First, thank them, agree all the nurses interviewed for this piece. After listening to them, you need to follow up. Focus on ‘what was responsible’, not ‘who is responsible’. That will show that speaking up is a tool for improvement, rather than something to be afraid of. You need to make the person who has come forward feel comfortable and psychologically safe, so think about the way you communicate with them.

Ms McKenzie says: ‘Make sure staff can see all concerns are taken seriously, even if they are later seen to be unfounded. Tell the employee who raised the concern how you propose to handle it in line with your employer’s policies and give a timeframe in which you will get back to them, both verbally and in writing.’

Further information


NHS Resolution (2023) Just and Learning Culture Charter. tinyurl.com/NHSR-culture-charter


RCN (2023) Raising and Escalating Concerns. tinyurl.com/RCN-escalating-concerns

Tips for line managers on creating a speaking-up culture

» Encourage workers to speak up in everyday working life, including team meetings and informal chats

» When someone raises a concern, ask them what they would like to happen as an outcome

» Keep in regular contact with the Freedom to Speak Up guardian at your organisation and familiarise yourself with its speaking-up processes

» Read and use the free e-learning module for line managers prepared by the National Guardian’s Office and NHS England

» Ensure your workers know who they can speak to besides you and share contact details for the organisation’s guardian

» Work to shift the focus from who has spoken up to what is being said, and from blaming to asking what can be learnt

» Reach out to organisations that are doing well on this issue and learn from them

» Try to understand the barriers that colleagues from minority ethnic communities or people who have been recruited from abroad might face

» Use the Nursing and Midwifery Council code of conduct as a tool.

Registrants need to act within the code’s framework, which can serve as a guide and advise you of the language that should be used

Source: National Guardian’s Office and NHS England (2022)