Nursing associates’ maximum potential

By Lynne Pearce
health journalist

Although nursing associates only entered the Nursing and Midwifery Council register in 2019, they have already become an integral part of the nursing workforce, says Claire Whittle, head of trainee nursing associates at University Hospitals Birmingham (UHB) NHS Foundation Trust.

‘They support and enhance the quality of patient care,’ she says. ‘They are very well-liked, skilled and valued and have undertaken rigorous education and assessment. Essentially they bridge the gap between healthcare assistants (HCAs) and registered nurses, freeing them up to deliver more complex care.’

Wide scope of practice

As one of the front-runners in adopting the role, UHB now has more than 600 nursing associates. There are plans to expand still further, with an aspiration to train 150 people on each of three intakes a year.

The apprenticeship is open both to the trust’s existing HCAs and external recruits, and while a significant number top-up with an 18-month apprenticeship to become a registered nurse – others are happy to remain as nursing associates.

‘Here they have quite a wide scope of practice, depending on the patient group they’re caring for and whether they’ve been educated and assessed as being confident and competent in carrying out any additional roles and responsibilities,’ says Ms Whittle, who has a team of clinical educators working alongside the trainees, supporting them throughout.

Roles across wards and specialties of nursing

At UHB, nursing associates work on many wards and in several clinical specialties, including critical care, paediatrics, older people’s care, the

It’s a fabulous role that is too often stuck in a pigeon hole

Illness had forced Su Hickman to give up her nursing degree, but then she discovered the possibility of becoming a nursing associate.

‘I loved learning and the academic side of things,’ says Ms Hickman, who studied at Oxford Brookes University. ‘I especially enjoyed finding out why you were doing something, for example, taking someone’s blood pressure.’

After qualifying, she took a band 5 clinical assessor role at Oxford University Hospitals, the trust where she had trained. ‘Not many nursing associates have the opportunity to work at band 5,’ says Ms Hickman. ‘I had a caseload of patients and was in charge of healthcare assistants too. I really enjoyed it.’

Sadly, after less than a year, her post ended. She joined an independent sector employer, again as an assessor, managing more than 30 carers.

‘I had to leave the NHS because I just couldn’t find anything else at band 5,’ she says. ‘I’d been in healthcare since 2008 and felt I had vast experience and knowledge, so I wasn’t willing to drop a band.’

While Ms Hickman describes the nursing associate role as fabulous, its key challenge is the lack of career progression, she says. ‘You’re pigeon-holed into a band 4 post. If you try to come out of your band 4 box, the door is firmly shut. It’s a shame because most nursing associates were healthcare assistants who’ve been doing the job for years.’

As a result, many see becoming a nursing associate as a stepping stone to qualification as a nurse, she believes. ‘Even now, people don’t know what the role is about,’ she says. ‘It’s incredibly misunderstood. But outside the NHS, it’s very respected. For me, it’s the perfect bridge for a healthcare assistant who doesn’t want to do a three-year nursing degree, but they want more knowledge, responsibility and to improve themselves.’

Today Ms Hickman is a clinical educator. Her company provides training to healthcare professionals on topics such as moving and handling, deteriorating patients and cannulation.

‘The company really appreciates the nursing associate role and thinks we have a lot to give, valuing my experience and knowledge. I’ve found my vocation.’

‘Our nursing associates bring strength and depth to the nursing care we can deliver’

Claire Whittle, head of trainee nursing associates, University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust

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community and learning disability services. Two of the trust’s nursing associates are in band 5 roles, working in clinical education.

‘Our nursing associates are fully embedded now in our organisation,’ says Ms Whittle. ‘We’ve worked hard to make that happen. They bring strength and depth to the nursing care we can deliver.’

**Protected workplace learning complements university and placement days**

More than 300 students are studying a two-year foundation degree nursing associate course at Birmingham City University (BCU). The programme is aimed at experienced HCAs who want to develop.

A key advantage is that it is run as an apprenticeship, so students are paid throughout. ‘People who wouldn’t usually be able to access higher education or become a nurse are being given that opportunity,’ says Sarah Davies, lecturer on the nursing associate degree programme.

Learning is split equally between theory and practice and apprentices spend one day each week at university and another on a placement outside their usual setting, in areas across the four nursing fields.

There are four modules in their first year, covering person and family-centred care, professional values, the parameters of practice for registered nursing associates, and safe administration of medication.

**‘People who wouldn’t usually be able to access higher education or become a nurse are being given that opportunity’**

*Sarah Davies, lecturer, nursing associate degree programme, Birmingham City University*

The second-year modules focus on leadership and mentoring skills, health sociology and health promotion.

**Option of a step-up programme**

The apprentices spend the rest of the time on their base ward, where they have protected learning time to develop their competencies.

Once qualified, they can choose to do a two-year step-up programme to become a registered nurse, which is also run as an apprenticeship.

‘There’s a huge value to the nursing associate role, which has played a big part in filling some of the workforce gaps,’ says Ms Davies. ‘While some will go on to become registered nurses, some have fulfilling careers as nursing associates, working in all kinds of areas. Here, we’ve just recruited a former nursing associate student to become one of our lecturers.’

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**How becoming a nursing associate gave me the insights I needed to move on to nurse registration**

After healthcare assistant Ian Costello’s manager witnessed him safely de-escalating an incident that could have become violent, they suggested he consider a trainee nursing associate programme.

‘Most of my family worked in the NHS and I’d always wanted to do my nurse training, but I couldn’t afford to do it through the self-funded route,’ says Mr Costello (pictured), who had spent 13 years working as a healthcare assistant at Warren’s Court, a medium secure unit managed by Hertfordshire Partnership University NHS Foundation Trust.

Although he didn’t have the necessary maths and English qualifications, his employer paid for him to attain them and he joined the first cohort of 1,000 trainee nursing associates when the pilot scheme began in 2017.

His 22-month course involved spending one day a week at university and placements in a variety of settings – including primary care, the community and the emergency department – while putting into practice what he’d learned back in his workplace.

While Mr Costello’s experience had always been in mental health, the nursing associate programme covers all four fields of nursing. ‘It was good for me to be able to take my skills into A&E, where someone may come in with a mental health issue, and be able to give them that extra support,’ he says.

He was also able to bring back newly gained expertise to his forensic unit, for example by performing an electrocardiogram (ECG).

‘Being a nursing associate really helped me look at the holistic side of patient care – not just mental health or learning disabilities but also physical health and neurodiversity too,’ says Mr Costello. ‘I also understood a lot more about the reasoning behind carrying out observations and what results might be telling us about that person’s health.’

Although he enjoyed being a nursing associate, he also recognised its limitations. ‘It’s a great role, but opportunities to progress higher are unlikely unless you do more training,’ he says. After returning to the unit, he decided to do an 18-month career progression apprenticeship to become a registered mental health nurse, also at the University of Hertfordshire, starting in January 2020.

**Fast promotion after qualifying as a nurse**

He became a charge nurse a month after qualifying, in November 2021. ‘By that time I had so much experience, as I was working as a nursing associate throughout the course,’ he says. ‘I can’t put into words what it meant to finally graduate. I was the first in my family. It was amazing.’

In March last year, he took up a new post as lead educator for pre-registration nursing and improvement and development manager for learning disabilities, for Hertfordshire and West Essex Integrated Care System (ICS).

Looking back, he made certain to make the most of everything that came his way, including becoming student representative for both the trust and the university, sitting on the national implementation panel for nursing associates and taking part in nationally recognised leadership courses.

‘It was my one opportunity and I took everything I could from it,’ he says.