

High quality nursing care – what is it and how can we best ensure its delivery?

The Next Stage Review *High quality care* for all places quality at the heart of the NHS. Nurses are in a powerful position to improve the quality of care, the experience of patients, and health outcomes across health services. Here we summarise key aspects of the recent National Nursing Research Unit report, *Nurses in Society: starting the debate and supporting evidence*¹⁻³. The stimulus for the report was the Next Stage Review and the sense that there is unacceptable variation in the quality of care. Here we consider what high quality nursing care is, the challenges facing the nursing profession regarding the nurse of the future, and suggest ways in which the profession can better ensure high quality care for all.

What is high quality nursing care?

We have previously examined what patients want⁴ and here draw more specifically on recent empirical evidence^{2,3}. Many of the people we spoke with had personal experiences of care as patients and also shared the healthcare experiences of friends or relatives. They identified that patients want to be treated well, to know their nurse is knowledgeable, skilled and competent, to have high quality care every time and want nurses to have a caring and humane attitude, make them feel safe and comfortable – ‘cared about’ as well as ‘cared for’⁵. The attitude and approach of the nurse is the most important factor in securing this experience for patients, enabling them to be *‘treated as a human being not a case’* with compassion, respect, empathy and by staff who are *‘interested in YOU’*.

Good quality nursing therefore means ‘a good experience for patients’ and was identified as a ‘how’, not a ‘what’ with six core elements:

1. A holistic approach to physical, mental and emotional needs, patient-centred and continuous care
2. Efficiency and effectiveness combined with humanity and compassion
3. Professional, high quality evidence-based practice
4. Safe, effective and prompt nursing interventions
5. Patient empowerment, support and advocacy
6. Seamless care through effective teamwork with other professions¹.

Nurses want many of the same things as patients and the public and identified five main aspects they valued most about nursing:

- Making a difference to patients’ lives
- Close contact with patients
- Delivering excellent care
- Working in a team and being a role model
- Continuous development - learning and improving¹.

Tomorrow's Nurse: What are the challenges facing the nursing profession?

The challenges facing society and healthcare mean that there is a need for a different kind of nurse in the future. The relationships between nurses and patients, and the environments in which nurses undertake their education and practice are changing.

Influences on the changed role of nurses:

- New roles and autonomy for community nurses
- Greater focus on health and prevention of ill health
- Increasing need to support students in practice
- Reduced lengths of acute stay
- Increased incidence of day surgery
- Independent nurse prescribing
- Nurses undertaking many junior doctor roles
- Greater autonomy for nurses in mental health and learning disability
- Management of whole episodes of care
- Greater supervision by nurses of care delivered by healthcare assistants
- Increased nurse specialist, practitioner and consultant roles
- Increased interdisciplinary teamwork and multiprofessional care.

Some of the enduring qualities of nursing are thought to have been lost with a false polarity emerging between the humanity of caring and the advanced technical tasks and roles that nurses now undertake. This has had a negative impact on the image of the nurse and what a nurse 'is' and 'does' with high profile commentators asserting in the media that nurses have failed to care⁶⁻⁸. In the past, the brand of nursing was strong with a clear identity: people felt that they knew what a nurse was and what a nurse did. Today the brand appears less strong, nursing is more complex and varied and multiple images prevail. Yet patients and the public are clear about what they want and what part they want to play in their healthcare and nurses need to be well educated, adaptable and able to demonstrate the value of the work they do.

How can the nursing profession ensure high quality care for all?

For change to happen and to more consistently ensure *high quality* care for all the nursing profession needs to:

- recast the role of the nurse as a *practitioner, partner* and *leader*
- embrace a new professionalism to re-establish and reset the values, behaviours and relationships with patients in the future
- reinforce and reiterate the centrality of caring and the patient experience, through an agreed set of nursing metrics which can value and measure the nursing contribution to healthcare
- continue to attract high calibre entrants through a new promotional campaign
- move to a graduate registered nursing workforce and identify strategies to support, retain and develop the current and future workforce
- take ownership and be responsible for the training quality and support for assistant nurses and practitioner roles and establish a scheme to regulate and oversee their education
- identify robust funding streams for nurse education with sufficient resources to support ongoing education and training and professional development to enable nurses to fulfil their future roles
- create cohesive career pathways for nurses, and review the content and structure of pre- and post-registration nurse education to include: core professional values; nurses' acting as guardians of care quality and the patient experience; working as practitioners, partners and leaders; clinical academic careers; new care pathways and increased work in the community and public health roles.

Nurses passionately want to provide excellent care to patients: we suggest starting the debate to ensure that this can be consistently achieved.

References and information

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