

Who wants to be a nurse?

Nursing roles and the configuration of health services will change in the future, but there will be an ongoing need to draw large numbers of talented people into nursing careers to deliver the Next Stage Review's vision of a "quality workforce". In this Policy+ we consider who is currently entering nursing and what can be done to maintain or increase the number of high calibre applicants to nursing courses. Drawing on work recently undertaken in the National Nursing Research Unit¹ and other analyses^{2,3} which have explored the current and future nursing workforce we consider "who wants to be a nurse"?

Attracting and recruiting nurses: current issues

Nurses are a central resource in the NHS and are crucial to the delivery of healthcare in the 21st century¹. The need for nursing care and therefore nurses is likely to increase. Yet:

- Between 2003-7 applications for nurse training in the UK fell by 26%, from 31,917 in 2003 to 23,722 in 2006-7². In the same period applications from men fell by 48% from 10,863 in 2003 to 5,535 in 2006-7.
- The UK along with other developed countries has an ageing nursing workforce⁴. In 2005 28% of nurses in the NHS were aged 50 or over; with more than 100,000 nurses on the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) register aged 55 or older, and a further 80,000 aged 50-55⁵
- Women, who make up 90% of the nursing workforce, have many more career choices open to them than in the past¹ and once recruited are more likely to take career breaks, work part-time and retire early⁶.
- Recent projections identify a possible shortfall of 14,000 nurses by 2011 if there is no increase in training commissions⁷.
- There is a worldwide shortage of nurses and the UK has in the recent past relied on internationally qualified nurses to fill NHS nursing posts⁷.

Attracting and recruiting the best people into nursing is important to maintain and drive forward high quality healthcare initiatives¹. Yet research undertaken 10 years ago reveals most school pupils were 'indifferent' to nursing and gave it no consideration as a career⁸. Currently very small numbers of school age children see nursing as a potential career. An online survey of 11-18 year olds in 2006⁹ found:

- Students wanted a future job that was interesting, made best use of their skills, was well paid and included working in a team and helping people.
- Only 2% were interested in a career in nursing and only 5-7% in medicine.
- Those considering nursing as a career saw nursing as hard work with long hours rather than seeing it as caring and helping work, although nurses themselves were seen as caring and dedicated¹⁰.
- Nursing may lack attraction as a career because of the conflicting and stereotypical images that prevail, with few modern nursing images conveying the complexity of the role¹.

Who are the current entrants to nursing?

In the UK, 66% of diploma entrants and 58% degree entrants in 2006-7 were over 21 years of age³. In England in total 40% of all nursing and midwifery entrants were over 26³. 90% of entrants are women^{2, 3}. Of all accepted applications 25% were from students from a black and minority ethnic background (BME). The mental health branch has the greatest proportion of BME students at 30% of all accepted entrants².

Analysis of the 2007 highest qualifications on entry reveal 94% of all applicants held a qualification of NVQ level 3 (equivalent to 5 GCSE grades A-C) or higher and 46% NVQ level 4 (equivalent to A levels or higher) compared with 64% and 27% respectively in the general population. In the UK, 35% of entrants to diploma programmes and 44% of entrants to degree programmes held GCSE/A levels and 9% of diploma entrants and 18% of degree entrants held other Higher Education or professional qualifications¹¹.

Conclusions and implications

- Nursing no longer attracts sufficient numbers of school leavers and will need to continue to work to attract entrants from a diverse age group. Considerable effort will be required to change the image of nursing among future school leavers and other entrants¹.
- Nursing remains a largely female workforce and males are severely under represented. Men could be a significant recruitment pool in the future⁶ if barriers to male recruitment could be overcome.
- Nursing appears to be an attractive career prospect for some, but not all, members of black and minority ethnic groups² and increased recruitment of BME students could help improve representation of minority ethnic workers in the NHS.

Given proposed moves to an all degree entry for nursing it is worth noting that 31% of current entrants could be excluded from a degree programme based on analysis of their qualifications². However, new degree level programmes could attract a new pool of potential recruits; people who had previously rejected nursing because they would not get a degree or had not considered it as a career option. Nonetheless, it will be important to keep the entry gate to nursing wide with a range of entry levels and career options including non registered associate nurse grades. The diploma for 14-19 year olds in health and social care may be a new potential access route into the nursing profession in the future².

Key issues for policy

- Young people have a multitude of career options open to them in the 21st century. The non-visible aspects of nursing (intellectual and decision making) need to be more identifiable to potential recruits through school careers advice, social networking and early career experiences.
- Workers in mid-life, men and ethnic minority entrants provide a potential pool of new recruits for nursing. Promotional campaigns need to be more tailored to attract workers in mid-life; male entrants; ethnic minority students and other non-traditional entrants.
- Resources will be required to continue to develop access courses for non traditional students; to continue to develop foundation degrees for assistant practitioners that will facilitate access to registered nurse courses in the future.

References and information

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