“Support staff need to know how important they are”

There are more than 2.1 million health sector employees in the UK, of which 40% work as healthcare support staff. But many of them don’t get the praise they deserve.

The 798,600 people who work as healthcare assistants, assistant practitioners, porters, cleaners, caterers, maintenance staff or administrative staff are essential. They need to know how important they are – and that their efforts don’t go unnoticed.

Understanding the challenges they face in their roles and thinking about what functions they serve can be helpful in ensuring they are the best fit and getting back what they give to their jobs.

Across healthcare, the needs of the population must inform what services are needed and the skills required will then become clear.

By creating higher-quality roles for support staff, using the skills required for the locality, and providing better progression opportunities into registered roles, millions could be saved every year, and staff will feel more supported. It’s therefore important not to be afraid of redesigning the workforce, and going deeper into the skills mix and care functions.

In any framework, the support workforce’s roles should provide the foundation upon which our healthcare sector is built. These workers need to have a clearly defined place, with champions to help push through their development, giving them recognition as they go. Introducing a new support worker role, it is vital to ensure the role is clearly defined and other members of the team appreciate its responsibilities, and the new working patterns will become seamlessly successful. It is also important to use available guidance. Skills for Health has a library of proven new role templates, which describe competencies, required learning and skills, assessment requirements and qualifications.

Looking to the future, progression routes will doubtless help motivate staff, contributing to individual ambition and esteem. Advancement in roles provides scope for traineeships or apprenticeships, which in turn provide opportunities for employers to take on candidates in the workplace and develop skills in-house. This helps to produce a happy and fulfilled workforce performing to the best of their abilities every day.

Skills for Health and the National Skills Academy for Health have launched a campaign to highlight the vital role support workers play in the health sector and to say thank you to unsung healthcare heroes.

A short film Our Health Heroes, featuring healthcare support workers from Southmead Hospital in Bristol, has been made to illustrate the impact and value the support workforce has on the delivery of individual patient care (bit.ly/SfHHeroes). You can support @OurHealthHeroes by sharing the film and your personal stories of support workers on Twitter using #OurHealthHeroes, @Skillsforhealth or @NSA_Health. The campaign celebrates all support staff by encouraging people who have benefitted from their support to share stories and thanks. NT

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Specialist nurses need to prove their worth

Specialist nurses have a pivotal role to play in patient care, yet as members of multi-professional teams, it can be difficult to demonstrate their unique contribution. These nurses need to gather data to justify their roles, but this can be challenging as the data may not be easily accessible and NHS IT systems may not automatically generate the information they need.

This means specialist nurses are often considered an easy target for redeployment and cuts as pressure increases on healthcare resources. It is therefore vital that specialists take action to prove their effectiveness. Our article on page 16 describes a programme developed by the Multiple Sclerosis Trust, which has provided valuable information to support MS nurses to articulate their value, develop important evaluation skills and improve services.

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SPOTLIGHT

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