

# Increasing staff retention by facilitating neonatal nurse development to an enhanced level

Many factors influence why a nurse makes the decision to leave an NHS post and in a time of both financial constraints and nurse shortages, retaining staff numbers is of significant importance. This paper will explore how empowering nurses through continuing professional development might aid nurse retention specifically in the area of neonatal intensive care.

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## The nursing shortage crisis

In 2015 Bliss released the report *Hanging in the Balance*,<sup>1</sup> which affirmed that two thirds of neonatal units did not have enough specialist nurses to meet British Association of Perinatal Medicine (BAPM) staffing guidance.<sup>2</sup> The shortage of nursing staff is not a new issue, and while there is no clear definition of what defines the term staff shortages, in a literature search Buchan found over 22,200 articles discussing the issue of staff shortages and highlighted that the crisis of nursing shortage is firmly on the policy agenda for many countries.<sup>3</sup> In addition to this, Buchan predicted that a large number of nurses would retire over the next ten years, ultimately worsening the problem. Eleven years on this issue still remains a concern, with Ian Cumming, Chief Executive of Health Education England, highlighting a predicted shortfall of nurses until 2020.<sup>4</sup> With figures from December 2015 showing that there were 23,443 vacant nursing posts and a 50% increase in nursing vacancies in the UK, nurse shortages are clearly a noteworthy concern.<sup>5</sup>

In response to the recent changes to remove the NHS bursary for nursing students, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) expressed its concerns about recruitment of nurses into the profession.<sup>6,7</sup> The Government proposal clarifies that the funding of student bursaries is made largely from NHS funds and therefore subject to financial constraint. A plan to offer a student loan system is proposed to create a sustainable funding system that could create up to 10,000 extra nurse-training places.<sup>8</sup> However, the RCN

surveyed more than 17,000 members and found that 90% disagreed with the proposal and 80% raised issues, commenting that it could have a negative impact on patient care. The survey also found that two thirds of the members questioned would not have pursued a career in nursing under the new funding plans, with one of the key reasons for student nurses discontinuing nurse training being linked to financial concerns.<sup>9</sup>

In addition, the potential impact on mature student applications, unanswered questions about the availability of mentors and placements, the insecurity related to staff recruitment from Europe and the UK's decision to leave the EU, all paint an uncertain picture of recruitment to nursing posts within the NHS.

## Reduced job satisfaction and 'burnout'

Many factors influence why a nurse makes the decision to leave an NHS post; an observational study highlighted that job dissatisfaction, stress and burnout are major factors that can contribute.<sup>10</sup> Burnout has been associated with a reduced quality of care, lower patient satisfaction and increased medical errors.<sup>10,11</sup> In addition to the effects on patient care, stress and burnout can exacerbate an already overstretched workforce by causing staff absence from the workplace due to sickness. According to the Office of National Statistics, NHS staff sickness is 27% higher than any other public sector organisation and 46% higher than all other sectors, with the NHS Survey 2014 stating that 39% of respondents had

## Keywords

nurse shortages; staff retention; neonatal CPD; empowerment; job satisfaction; enhancing neonatal nursing

## Key points

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1. The role of the enhanced neonatal nurse practitioner (ENNP) has been embraced by the neonatal nursing community.
2. Nurse retention increases when development and education are supported.
3. Since the late 1990s nurses have been accessing the ENNP course in Manchester; 2017 has seen an increase in numbers.

been absent from the workplace due to stress-related illness.<sup>12,13</sup>

A European survey found that UK nurses reported the highest levels of burnout at 46% (28% being the European average).<sup>10</sup> This also has financial implications for NHS trusts, with staff sickness and absence rates estimated to cost the NHS £3.3 million annually per NHS organisation.<sup>14</sup>

It has been suggested that, due to the specialised environment, neonatal nurses can experience high levels of physical and psychological stress, in turn leading to reduced job satisfaction and burnout.<sup>11</sup>

## Creating a positive work environment

Workplace empowerment can have positive effects on job satisfaction and has been shown to be an important factor in creating a positive work environment for staff, having a contributory impact on staff burnout and turnover.<sup>15,16</sup> It is evident from the research that the degree of control staff perceive they have related to the conditions of their work, is linked to the satisfaction that they feel. Creating a structure where nurses have access to opportunity, information, support and resources can increase empowerment, improving efficiency of the workplace and offering greater job satisfaction.<sup>16</sup> Some of the issues raised in NHS Health Education England's *Growing Nursing Numbers*<sup>17</sup> include the need to provide continuing professional development (CPD) and to develop nurse leaders; effective leadership being essential in creating a positive work environment.

## The role of the neonatal nurse

The role of the neonatal nurse has evolved over the years with opportunities for progression widely available and further training essential for providing a high quality service.<sup>18</sup> Survival of the smallest and most preterm babies does not just rely on nurse staffing ratios but the specialist levels of education and experience of the nurses providing that care.<sup>19</sup>

Neonatal units are specialist areas of care and registered nurses and midwives who are new to the specialty will have had limited exposure and require new knowledge and skills. There has been a clear structured approach for neonatal nurse education for many years, with career progression from qualification in neonatal specialty (QIS) to the enhanced neonatal nurse practitioner (ENNP) and



Neonatal nurses at an ENNP study day.

the advanced neonatal nurse practitioner (ANNP). The role of the ANNP, as described by Jones and Ashworth,<sup>20</sup> fills the gap between the nursing and medical role with ANNPs becoming part of the medical rota. The role has become established within neonatal units across the UK and is well documented in the literature. Although the training for this role follows the medical model to meet the service needs created by medical shortages in the UK, it is argued that the role of the ANNP is not just to accommodate medical shortages but is seen as an opportunity for nursing development and career advancement.<sup>20</sup> ANNPs are not a product of an educational course alone but a mix of experience, training and personality.<sup>21</sup>

## The ENNP

Many nurses may aspire to progress their professional development, but not down the medicalised route of the ANNP. The role of the ENNP was developed in the late 1990s for neonatal nursing staff that, following QIS education and clinical consolidation, aspired to further their knowledge and skills to enhance their nursing care.<sup>20</sup> BAPM describes the role as a nurse who is qualified in specialty and has undergone further education and training.

The academic course aims to develop increased levels of skill and knowledge to support an infant during the resuscitation process and the pre-transport stabilisation period, and enhance holistic neonatal nursing practice throughout an infant's hospitalisation at all levels of dependency. ENNPs are able to provide skilled professional leadership that can help improve clinical practice and many ENNPs

take senior roles or become part of specific ENNP teams responsible for ward rounds, admissions and discharge alongside the ANNP and medical team. In acting as a role model, the ENNP encourages and motivates further learning and development in more junior members of staff.

The way in which neonatal teams utilise an ENNP differs. Some units have developed a structured workforce plan that embeds the ENNP firmly into the high dependency management team.<sup>20</sup> In other units, the ENNP has become part of band 6 development with the expectation that a band 6 nurse will embark on the academic course and work as shift coordinator. Some trusts have evidenced the benefits of staff development and the role of the ENNP within the neonatal team. Interestingly over the past few years, the University of Manchester has seen an increase in nurses self-funding the ENNP course, which pointedly indicates that the ENNP role offers value for career progression and a personal development opportunity.

The ENNP course offers assurance to managers and increases confidence in the individual. One experienced nurse, upon completion said: "I did not know what I did not know until I completed the ENNP course." This sentiment has been reiterated many times with many nurses verbalising how much the academic journey of the enhancing course has increased their confidence and understanding of neonatal intensive care management.

Although there are many factors that affect staff shortages in neonatal care, funding is undoubtedly a contributing factor alongside a reduction of nurse availability.<sup>1,14,17,22</sup> Given that there is a direct

correlation between a nurse's intent to leave a position and empowerment, and that career advancement opportunities increase feelings of empowerment, it follows that education and CPD link to staff retention.<sup>23</sup> With financial cuts hitting all areas of the NHS<sup>24</sup> and a growing demand for neonatal nurses, the NHS is struggling to recruit and retain staff. Perhaps now is an ideal time to explore ways to motivate and empower those neonatal nurses already in established posts via the ENNP route. A work environment that supports its nurses and offers opportunities for career progression contributes to job satisfaction and the decision to remain in a role.<sup>10,17,25,26</sup> Any opportunity to develop the role of the ENNP in units across the UK should surely be seen as a prime route to recruit and retain neonatal nursing staff.


## Conclusion

In current times where increased workload and nurse retention challenges are a common theme, a key way to sustain high quality care is through improving staff experience and supporting staff development. In terms of professionalism and dedication, neonatal staff do an incredible job but they are spread too thin.<sup>1</sup>

It is essential that strategies are put in place to keep staff currently in post; the role of the ENNP could be the positive influence that is needed to retain our specialist neonatal nursing expertise.

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