REAL Centre

Nurse Supply: Can the NHS close the gap?

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Context
Nursing shortages in the NHS

- In 2020, there were c 40,000 NHS nursing vacancies in NHS England

- Recognising the issue, in December 2019 the current government made a commitment to deliver 50,000 more registered nurses to the NHS by the end of this current parliament, through a combination of increased supply, recruitment and retention

- We have taken a long-term view in exploring trends in NHS nurse supply in England, and look beyond the feasibility (and relevance) of meeting the government’s 50,000 nurse target
The scale and nature of the shortfall of nurses
NHS nursing numbers have not kept pace with growth in NHS activity over the last 10 years

- The trend of activity growth is unlikely to change in the coming years. The NHS will need sustained expansion in nurse numbers even to deliver existing service levels.

- A number of emergency initiatives have been implemented to enable a rapid temporary expansion of the NHS nursing workforce in response to COVID-19. But it is too early to discern the full implications of the pandemic.

The (modest) increase in the total number of nurses over the decade to June 2020 masks significant underlying variation across different sectors.

- While the number of nurses working in adult hospital nursing in the last ten years has increased gradually, there have been declines in other critical areas – community nursing, health visiting, mental health and learning disabilities.

- Further, in the 12 months to June 2020, the FTE number of nursing support staff increased at over twice the rate of growth in FTE-registered nurse numbers.

Registered nursing full-time equivalent vacancy rates were higher than the overall NHS vacancy rate in every region in England in June 2020

- This highlights the system-wide nature of the nurse staffing shortfall.

To compound the problem, the nursing workforce is ageing

- The proportion of nurses and health visitors aged 55 and older (and therefore nearing retirement age) increased from 12% in 2010 to 17% in 2020.

- This ageing of the nursing workforce raises a significant replacement challenge.

Source: NHS Digital, NHS HCHS

*The data for this chart are available only as headcounts, hence we provide them for headcounts only and not for FTE nurses.
Nurse supply: Can the NHS close the gap?
Domestic supply: there are a number of routes to enter the registered nurse workforce in the UK

- School leavers/mature entrants
  - a) Academic qualifications (3 A levels)
  - b) Access course
  - 3-year undergraduate nursing degree

- Graduate entry
  - 2-year postgraduate nursing

- Nursing degree apprenticeship
  - 4 years

- Nursing associate
  - 2-year trainee nursing associate
  - 2-year ‘top up’

- Assistant practitioner
  - 2-year foundation degree
  - 2-year ‘top up’

Source: Health Foundation
Increasing the number of nurses that complete training is one key to a sustained solution to the nursing shortfall

- 2020 saw the highest annual number of acceptances to undergraduate (pre-registration) nursing degree courses in the UK since 2011.

- It remains to be seen if the funding, and university and clinical placement capacity, will exist to sustain this in the coming years.

Source: UCAS 2020
How does the UK compare internationally?

- The UK ranks below the OECD average in terms of both the number of practising nurses and the number of nurse graduates (graph alongside) relative to its population.

- On both counts, the UK reports lower ratios than comparable countries such as Germany and Australia.

Source: OECD Health Statistics 2020 – Health Care Resources, stats.oecd.org
The UK’s reliance on international nurse recruitment is at a higher level than most other OECD countries

- In every year since 1990, at least one in every 10 new entrants to the NMC register has come from other countries. The proportion of these international inflows peaked at over 50% in 2001/02 and has been on the increase in recent years.

- Since the Brexit vote, there has been a rapid decline in the number of EEA-trained nurses registering in the UK, but an increase in non-EEA international recruitment, especially from the Philippines and India. This trend looks set to continue, even with travel disruption caused by COVID-19.

Source: OECD Health Statistics 2020 – Health Workforce Migration, stats.oecd.org
Undergraduate nurse training and international recruitment together account for a great majority of the UK’s nurse supply

Source: Estimates by HF authors based on data from the NMC, UCAS, HEE and the Office for Students
Discussion
Discussion

- The government’s 50,000 target is likely to be achieved. However it is top down and it is not clear how it was determined. The target is not differentiated by geographical region or sector within the NHS, or branch of nursing.

- The 5 domestic supply routes into UK nursing are markedly different in current volume, and in terms of scope for rapid scaling up. The 2 year post grad route appears to have promise.

- Acceptances/ applications to pre-reg nursing are up. More mature entrants. Expand education capacity?- funding modalities, greater use of tech, effective clinical placements.

- The international nurse supply route has been disrupted by COVID-19 and was already changing because of the post-Brexit immigration system…..but it will continue to be a critical determinant in increasing nursing numbers across the next 5 years, particularly in the hospital sector.
Discussion

A shift in focus is required, away from a top-down target to a more sustainable and long-term approach that aims to invest in increasing the domestic supply of the nursing workforce. This will require a nationally coordinated approach, which calls for:

• Improvements in data on the nursing profession and the nursing workforce
• Clarity over who is responsible for aspects of national and regional planning and coordination
• A review of the domestic nurse education system
• A sustained policy emphasis on investing in the retention of older and experienced nurses
• A tapered target to ‘manage down’ active international recruitment over the next 5-10 years
• A sustainable pay determination system that rewards nurses equitably over the long term
Reference
Reference

Buchan J, Ball J, Shembavnekar N, Charlesworth A (2020)

Building the NHS nursing workforce in England.
Health Foundation/ REAL Centre