

Widening entry to the caring professions

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Professor Alan Glasper discusses a new UK government initiative to introduce apprenticeship schemes in healthcare

Introduction

In March 2014 the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and Department of Health announced that it was expanding its existing policy “Improving the quality of further education and skills training” (<https://www.gov.uk/government/policies/improving-the-quality-of-further-education-and-skills-training>) to enable healthcare assistants (HCA) who have demonstrated prowess in delivering high quality care to undertake an apprenticeship to enable them to join the register of nurses. This new apprenticeship scheme is one of many, which have been formulated, to enable people from atypical educational backgrounds to join one of the health care professions.

This has come about subsequent to the failures in care, which were exposed by the Francis Inquiry into the events at Mid-Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust. <http://www.midstaffspublicinquiry.com/>

As a consequence the government has made a commitment to make positive changes to the culture of the NHS, not least in helping unregulated staff to aspire to professional status.

HCA's are a large component of the unregulated caring workforce, and following the publication of the Francis Inquiry report, the Secretary of State for Health commissioned Camilla Cavendish, the associate editor of The Times newspaper to undertake an independent review.

This review was orientated around how HCA's and others within the NHS and social care can be better enabled to treat all patients and clients with respectful care and compassion.

Her report was published in 2013 and this new apprenticeship scheme for HCA's leading to nursing is a government response to the Cavendish report. (https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/212732/Cavendish_Review_ACCESSIBLE_-_FINAL_VERSION_16-7-13.pdf)

Glasper (2013) has indicated that with some 1.3 million unregistered HCAs and support staff in the front line of the NHS and social care, the lack of formal training for these individuals should no longer be tolerated.

Cavendish indicated in her review that many HCAs feel undervalued and overlooked despite many of them undertaking roles that were formerly the preserve of nurses and doctors. Unlike the old enrolled nurse of yesteryear, healthcare assistants have no compulsory or consistent training, and a profusion of job titles, which confuses patients and clients. This has worsened because of a failure by Health Education England (HEE) to fully consider the ramifications of the move to all-degree nursing and how this would affect the career prospects of HCAs. Good hospitals and care homes are now unable to advance some of their best HCA's into nursing because they do not meet the new entry requirements expected by universities of undergraduates..

The Nursing and Midwifery Council currently regulate nurses, who make up 59% of the caring workforce. By contrast their HCA counterparts are not regulated and this new apprenticeship scheme is designed to help well motivated HCA's to eventually acquire a degree in nursing.

Thus far the career path 'glass ceiling', which terminates at band 4 for HCAs, has ensured that many have not been able to see a clear career path for themselves. Although the educational backgrounds of HCAs are often bewildering with some having virtually no training at all, there is no doubt that HCAs want training and will welcome these new proposals to allow them to access undergraduate nursing. Furthermore, it is recognised that many registered nurses are close to retirement age.

It is Cavendish's assertion that HCA's should have the opportunity of progressing to nursing, and new research conducted by Aitken et al (2014) shows that that undergraduate nurse education might reduce preventable hospital deaths. This is an important finding as the Patients Association have been critical of the NMC move to all graduate nurse education (<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2009/nov/12/nurses-nursing-qualifications-degrees-nmc-rcn>).

These new proposals for a nurse apprenticeship schemes are also to be linked to knowledge and skill acquisition at level 6 (Level 6 qualifications are at a level equivalent to Bachelor's degrees). Cavendish also recommended an exploration of the Barchester proposal for a higher apprenticeship.

The Barchester Proposal

The Barchester group is one of the UK's largest quality care providers and they currently deliver the care services to more than 10,000 people in more than 200 homes across England. Such an organization has had to invest significantly in staff training and the Barchester Business School offers a wide range of learning and development opportunities. Barchester supports work experience for young people at school so that they are encouraged to enjoy a career in care, for example. Importantly the organization has also developed strategies to encourage staff at all levels to develop their skills and acquire qualifications up to graduate level and beyond. Barchester have been developing higher apprenticeships to enhance the career pathways for their ambitious care staff. This builds on the success of their apprenticeship programmes and offers motivated people the opportunity to advance their career into nursing. It is because of this investment in the training of care staff that Barchester Healthcare has been invited to become involved in the development of this apprenticeship standard for nursing.

(<http://www.barchester.com/about-barchester/barchester-business-school>)

Skills For Care have developed Higher Apprenticeships which enable the use of academic credit transfer to open up access to Higher Education to experienced workers and recently qualified advanced apprentices. For new recruits to the care sector, the potential to eventually progress into Higher Education from Apprenticeship level will be visible right from the start of their career.

(<http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Qualifications-and-Apprenticeships/Apprenticeships/Higher-Apprenticeships.aspx>)

Implementing the new apprenticeship scheme to nursing

A group of NHS organizations and private providers have been empowered to lead the initiative including Barchester Healthcare. The mission of the so called trailblazer group on behalf of the government is to develop the degree-level apprenticeship scheme in partnership with Health Education England (HEE)

HEE have already pioneered the introduction of pilot schemes to facilitate aspirant student nurses spending up to a year in frontline practice prior to receiving NHS funding to undertake a degree in nursing. This also came about after the publication of the Francis Inquiry report which recommended an increased focus in nurse training and education on the practical requirements of delivering compassionate care and an emphasis on the acquisition of appropriate care values, attitudes and behaviours.

(<http://hee.nhs.uk/work-programmes/pre-nursing-care-experience-pilots/>)

This new apprenticeship proposal has similar aspirations to the pre entry to nursing scheme, but with the additional benefit of widening access to the nursing profession. The new scheme will be focused on recruiting the best well-motivated and mentally able healthcare assistants who have demonstrated that they are able to deliver high quality care to patients. Such applicants will not have the academic qualifications necessary to access a traditional university nursing degree programme.

The new apprenticeship scheme will therefore ensure that there are opportunities for care workers who aspire to professional status to progress their careers by offering them opportunities to use their vocational experience of working as a healthcare assistant to enter the nursing profession.

The government is currently seeking to develop pathways in which it will become customary for young people to choose either to go to university or to commence skills training through an apprenticeship. This latest route into the nursing profession is a good example of how this dual entry to professionalism is another step forward in making this the norm. Investing in Health Care assistants

There is no doubt that NHS and social care support workers have a long history of delivering high quality, compassionate care to patients and their families. The new apprenticeship scheme to professional nursing is designed to help healthcare support workers from non-academic backgrounds who have demonstrated a commitment to care to progress their careers.

As part of the NMC stipulation that all new entrants to the professional nursing register must have a nursing degree, the new higher-level apprenticeship will have the degree at its core. Importantly any undergraduate course that prepares students for the register has to be delivered under the auspices of an NMC accredited Educational Institution and one with degree awarding powers. As stipulated by the Privy Council each UK degree can only be awarded by a legally approved degree-awarding body that has overall responsibility for the academic standards and quality of the qualification. This applies even if all or part of the provision is delegated, by formal agreement, to another provider. <http://www.qaa.ac.uk/>

aboutus/dap/Pages/default.aspx

Although not as yet defined for nursing there are already a number of degree level higher apprenticeships which offer work-based routes into professions which have traditionally been the preserve of graduates.<http://www.apprenticeships.org.uk/employers/the-basics/higher-apprenticeships.aspx>

Conclusion

It will be imperative that on completion, nurse apprentices will have all of the skills, knowledge and confidence they need to perform the full range of nursing duties, well and confidently, meeting their employer's and professional registration requirements. There is a genuine belief that the apprenticeship scheme will help meet the current and future demands for high quality healthcare.

References

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