

Upskilled Health Care Assistant role improves Mental Health care delivery

A significant number of patients requiring acute care at the Royal United Hospital (RUH) in Bath have complex health needs and a growing number of these extend to mental health needs. The senior nursing team identified that by piloting the upskilling of a cohort of Health Care Assistants, it would be possible to significantly enhance care for patients with Mental Health (MH) needs and potentially reduce the use of RMN agency staff.

“It’s amazing to see the change in practice and the movement in understanding around patients with mental health needs. The Health Care Assistants are a delightful group of staff to work with and they have really enjoyed putting their learning into practice. Of course, the change has to continue beyond the end of the life of the project, and from what I’ve seen so far, I’m confident we are seeing change for good.”

Julie Blackman

Head of Clinical and Vocational Skills

Background

The RUH recognised that existing options to ensure these patients were looked after by staff with the right skills (RMN agency nurse or nurse special) did not always deliver a timely consistent quality care outcome and that there was a need for competence for staff in support roles.



The RUH worked with Skills for Health to develop a core group of HCAs to support this ambition, utilising the National Occupational Standards to develop a Transferable Role Template. The nine month project focused on upskilling a cohort of HCAs to support an improvement in care for people with mental health needs and support a reduction in reliance on RMN agency staff. The project aimed to:

- develop a health care assistant (HCA) band 3 six month mental health training programme
- recruit and develop a cohort of band 3 mental health senior HCAs using the programme
- improve care for patients with mental health needs.
- successfully deploy upskilled specialist HCAs on achievement of programme
- develop a nationally transferable role template for a level 3 Mental Health Care Support worker
- demonstrate cost savings on RMN agency usage.

The outcomes so far

- a six month level 3 vocationally based programme was developed
- a cohort of eight HCAs was recruited and successfully completed the programme
- Mid-term qualitative evaluation identifies that HCAs have an
 - Increased understanding of mental health issues and the associated behaviours
 - Improved thinking strategies and enhanced communication skills
 - Increased confidence in approaching and caring for this group of patients able to share knowledge with colleagues
 - increased confidence in challenging team members.
- RUH has developed a transferable role template for a level 3 MH support worker role.

How they did it

The RUH chose to invest in developing HCAs to deliver enhanced care for this group of vulnerable patients. After developing a six month training programme and devising a transferable role template working with Skills for Health, eight Band 2 HCAs were selected for upskilling in the area of mental health. Recruits came from the HCA pool and three wards. The wards chosen were care of older persons (dementia), gastroenterology (alcohol and substance misuse) and trauma and orthopaedics (dementia and self-harm).

Project leads worked closely with Avon and Wiltshire Mental Health Partnership, the RUH's Mental Health liaison team, who were keen for the cohort of staff to act as champions for this group of patients, and specialists from within the Trust. The training combined work based learning, simulation, face to face and self-directed learning plus peer learning. Clinical supervision was provided by the MH liaison team.



The impact

By midterm the project has been able to identify changed individual behaviours not only among the HCAs but also group behaviour within ward teams, to the benefit of this highly vulnerable patient group. Examples include:

- HCAs have become mental health champions.
- Sharing of enhanced knowledge/awareness with others and increased confidence in challenging multidisciplinary team members' approach to patients with MH needs
- Recognising that a patient with schizophrenia was agitated and would not stay still when staff wanted to insert a venflon. The HCA intervened, calmed the situation and the patient
- HCAs role modelling new language with colleagues, sharing knowledge and identifying risks
- HCAs reminding registered staff about timely administering of medication for patients with MH disorders such as dementia
- Investing more time to listen to patients and talking to them.

The project's midterm evaluation shows that behaviours have changed, and it's anticipated that final evaluation, based on group feedback and one to one interviews with HCAs and managers, will confirm that these behaviours are becoming embedded in team approaches. The upskilled HCAs are doing things differently with patients since their understanding of MH issues has improved. The cohort has heightened awareness of common mental health problems and their role modelling of changes in behaviour and approach are having a positive impact on colleagues. The upskilled HCAs have truly become the RUH's mental health champions.

Future Development

The evaluation will continue for a further three months beyond the programme end to monitor the impact and change now the HCAs have completed the programme. This will be informed by data collection from a 12 month period ensuring maximisation of lessons learned and thorough understanding of the project's impact before proceeding with the next programme.