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Title: Attracting, recruiting and retaining nurses and care workers working in care homes: the need for a nuanced understanding informed by evidence and theory

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Abstract:

The care home sector relies on nurses and care workers to deliver care to residents living with frailty and complex needs. However, attracting, recruiting and retaining staff is one of the biggest challenges facing this sector. There is evidence available that describes factors that influence staff decisions to join and/or remain in the care home workforce, for example, individual rewards (such as feeling valued at work or training opportunities), relationships with colleagues and residents, supportive management or working arrangements (including flexible hours). However, it is less clear how different strategies are informed by evidence to improve recruitment and retention. Care homes are heterogeneous in terms of their size, staffing levels and mix, staff age groups, geographical location, and working conditions. What matters to different members of the care home workforce will vary across nurses and care workers of different ages, and levels of qualification or experience. Recognising this diversity is key: understanding how to attract, recruit and retain staff needs to discriminate and offer solutions that address this diversity. This important area of practice does not lend itself to a 'one approach fits all' solution. This commentary provides a brief overview of known workforce challenges for the care home sector and argues for studies that use empirical evidence to test different theories of what might work for different staff, how and why, and in different circumstances.

Key points:

- Staff working in care homes provide care and support to society's most frail and vulnerable older people.
- Attracting, recruiting and retaining staff is a challenge across the sector.
- Consideration of heterogeneity across care homes, and staff characteristics means that a 'one-size' solution to address this challenge is unlikely to be effective.
- A nuanced understanding of what works to attract, recruit, and retain staff, under which circumstances, why, and the associated cost implications is an important societal issue.

The essential role of the care home workforce

Staff working in care homes for older people provide care and support to society's most frail and vulnerable people. Care home providers have a responsibility to provide sufficient numbers of suitably qualified, competent, skilled and experienced staff to meet the needs of the people using the service at all times [1]. Yet, attracting, recruiting and retaining staff in the sector is an ongoing challenge for many countries [2]. There are international variations in data collection and reporting of number of staff in post, and turnover and vacancy rates. In the UK, there is an average staff turnover of 31.5% in care homes with nursing (nursing homes), and 29.6% in care homes without nursing (often referred to as residential homes), and an estimated staff vacancy rate of 35,500 across the sector [3, 4]. However, there are wide variations within these average figures by provider and care home: the reasons for these variations are not well understood. With many countries highlighting current and projected staffing shortages [2] these variations are likely to be replicated.

The mix of staff employed by care homes varies by the type of care home. In the UK nursing homes employ both registered nurses and care workers. Residential homes employ care workers, with nursing care provided to residents by registered nurses employed by community and primary care services. In all care homes, care workers represent a diverse group of staff: employed at different levels (e.g. junior and senior care workers), with variation in their preparation and training for their role. The care home population is projected to rise by 127% over the next 20 years [5]. An important challenge faced by the sector is how to attract, recruit and retain staff to meet this growing demand for long-term care and support. Developing theory informed by evidence to support planning for this is imperative.

Why is attracting, recruiting and retaining care home workforce a challenge?

There are multiple reasons offered as to why the care home sector struggles to recruit and retain staff. These include: a history of underinvestment in the sector [6]; a national shortages of nurses [7]; low public and professional perceptions of working in this setting [8]; long and unsociable hours with low pay and unclear career progression [9]; zero hour contracts; and the demanding nature of care work [10]. At a policy level, the rhetoric about shortfall in nurses focuses on the acute sector. For example, in the UK, recent government actions promise to increase the number of nurses working in the acute hospital sector by 50,000 [11]. Yet, there is a lack of government focus on investing in securing a registered nursing workforce in social care, which exacerbates the problems being faced by the sector. In addition, recent changes in UK immigration policies will make it difficult to recruit staff from overseas: these staff currently make up 26% (nursing homes) and 15% (residential homes) of the workforce in the sector [3, 4]. The international challenge of attracting, recruiting and retaining staff needs to be addressed. Taking the time to offer solutions informed by evidence is timely.

A 'one-size' solution is unlikely to be effective

The range of strategies that might improve the recruitment and retention of staff, or factors that influence the quality of work life, are well documented in the literature and detail individual, relationship and organisational considerations. This includes factors such as: staff who perceive they have supervisory and management support in place [12]; supportive

work cultures which might include peer mentoring approaches [13]; and flexible working arrangements [14].

It is unclear from the evidence which strategies are most effective for different staff groups (role, age, preparation). There is evidence that rates of staff turnover vary by seniority and experience in the sector [3, 4]. Care homes employ a wide range of age groups, ranging from school leavers, to those with extensive care experience but close to retirement. The millennial generation may differ to older generations and those returning to work after a break. Davis and Eastwood [15] have argued that millennials are looking for jobs with meaning and are more responsive to attractive job adverts, and employers who have a communication style that keeps them informed and where regular feedback is provided. It is also not apparent in which environments these strategies would have most impact: what works for a large provider organisation may not apply for a single care home provider or small to medium sized organisation.

What research is needed now?

For research to benefit international care home policy and practice, we consider it timely for a more sophisticated approach to reviewing existing evidence that goes beyond describing to theorising about how and why interventions for attraction, recruitment and retention work, for which staff, in which environments and why, and the associated cost implications. The variations in staff stability and turnover across the sector provides opportunities for learning and understanding from care homes that have a lower than average industry turnover, and conversely a higher than average turnover. Using a realist approach [16] offers a way of examining the evidence, while also working closely with relevant expert stakeholders. Relevant stakeholders include care home staff and managers, human resource staff, residents, relatives, and organisations such as The National Care Forum, Care England, Skills for Care, The Royal College of Nursing, and the Department of Health and Social Care. Researchers need to work together with these stakeholders both while carrying out research (including evidence syntheses), and when translating the findings into a format that will be useful for the sector. The findings and recommendations then need to inform national workforce planning and strategy.

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