



Falling NHS staff numbers and high turnover threaten patient care, says report

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NHS workforce planning in England is “not fit for purpose,” with high staff turnover in many trusts threatening the continuity of care of patients, an analysis has found.¹

Falling numbers of GPs and nurses contradict the government’s rhetoric about increasing staff in “priority” areas of the NHS such as primary care and mental health, said the damning report from the think tank the Health Foundation. The government has pledged to increase the number of GPs by 5000 by 2020, but evidence indicates that numbers are “moving further away” from the target, said the report. It showed that GP numbers fell by 0.7% between December 2016 and the end of June 2017 and nurse numbers by 0.2% in the year to April 2017.

The fall in nurse numbers was notable in community nursing and mental health, two areas identified as critical to the success of NHS England’s *Five Year Forward View*.

The Health Foundation questioned whether ministers’ aim to create 21 000 new posts in mental health by 2020 was achievable or would provide staff with the right level of skills.² It said that, by most indicators, workforce trends were going “in a negative direction” in the NHS in England, while admissions continued to rise.

The report said that the NHS workforce grew by 2% in the year to April 2017 but that this masked “critical variations.” Growth areas included support to clinical staff (up by 2.5% to 312 890), consultants (up by 3.5% to 45 120), and managers and senior managers (up by 4.3% to 31 250).

Except for medical workforce numbers, there was no evidence of recent substantial staffing growth in the main professions, while in primary care there were “clear signs of real reductions in the availability of staff.”

Anita Charlesworth, the Health Foundation’s head of research and economics, said, “There is a growing gap between rhetoric about the government’s ambitions to grow the NHS workforce and the reality of falling numbers of nurses and GPs.” She said that instead of a clear strategy to ensure that the NHS had the workforce it needed there had been one-off announcements and initiatives, beset by “unrealistic timescales.”

She said, “With winter approaching and staffing numbers in critical areas once again declining, the NHS will be relying on the efforts of its staff to meet the inevitable rising pressures. But in the long term both the people working for and the people using the NHS deserve better.”

The Health Foundation said that the NHS in England would be short of qualified nurses by 2021 and that it was unlikely the government would meet its ambition to recruit more GPs from overseas.

Ministers aimed to recruit 2000 GPs from overseas over the next three years, but the report quoted data collected by *The BMJ* showing that just 38 were appointed in the first six months of 2017, said the report.³

The Health Foundation said that an annual rate of 30% of staff leaving in some NHS trusts reflected a “worsening picture” of overall workforce stability, “with the likelihood of added costs being incurred at a time when the NHS cannot afford them.”

Danny Mortimer, chief executive of NHS Employers, said, “It’s clear from this important report there is more work to be done in strengthening staff retention and reducing turnover to guard against future instability and protect services to our patients.

“The issue of workforce instability has also been exacerbated by the uncertainty over the future of EU staff working in the health service, and we know it will be necessary to continue recruiting from Europe and elsewhere in the world, as it won’t be possible to fill gaps with increased domestic supply in the immediate term.”

- 1 Charlesworth A, Gershlick B, Seccombe I. Rising pressure: the NHS workforce challenge. Health Foundation. Oct 2017. <http://www.health.org.uk/publication/rising-pressure-nhs-workforce-challenge>.
- 2 Torjesen I. Thousands more mental health posts will be created in England. *BMJ* 2017;359:j3676. doi:10.1136/bmj.j3676 pmid:28760804.
- 3 Rimmer A. International recruitment scheme brings 38 GPs to NHS. *BMJ* 2017;359:j3462. doi:10.1136/bmj.j3462 pmid:28716841.

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