Nursing skill mix in spinal cord injury rehabilitation – improving recruitment, retention and quality

What was the problem?
The two largest spinal cord injury rehabilitation wards, totalling 46 beds, carried up to 20 whole-time equivalent (WTE) registered nurse (RN) vacancies and relied heavily on bank and agency staff. Staff experienced lack of cohesion as a result. Patients noticed this, and feedback was negative at times.

What was the solution?
Revising the skill-mix reduced the number of RN posts at bands 5 and 6, and introduced a skilled spinal injury healthcare assistant and assistant practitioner (AP) trained to care for this patient group, while providing structured support to RNs.

What were the results?
The skill-mix changes and associated initiatives e.g. change to shift patterns, had a positive impact on quality, efficiency and productivity during a three-month pilot:

- enhanced care quality, such as improved assessment and monitoring
- improved staff turnover and recruitment – a reduction of 9.0 WTE RN vacancies, and turnover reduced from 16% to 14.8%
- use of temporary staff reduced by 46% with associated cost saving
- staff time freed for indirect care – a gradual monthly increase in staff compliance with mandatory training
- a more cohesive workforce with enhanced skills, better able to focus on key rehabilitation activities and spinal injury care
- reduced staffing costs forecast to yield £130,000 a year
- estimated cost savings of £50,000 a year attributed to change in shift pattern.

What were the learning points?
- It is important to test the change idea, embed the change and learn from practice before rolling out.
• Executive support for such changes is vital.
• Involve all relevant stakeholders, and communicate well with staff from the start.
• Education and training of staff.

Find out more
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