Being a manager, becoming a professional? A case study and interview-based exploration of the use of management knowledge across communities of practice in health-care organisations

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Declared competing interests of authors: none

Published May 2014
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr02140

Plain English summary

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Health Services and Delivery Research 2014; Vol. 2: No. 14
DOI: 10.3310/hsdr02140

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Given the demands facing NHS managers, it is important to know that they can access leading-edge management knowledge to improve health-care delivery and that this knowledge can be effectively translated into different health-care settings. Currently, we have only a limited understanding of how managers access and use management knowledge and how this is affected by the organisations they work for and the professional communities they relate to.

This research sets out to fill these gaps in our understanding by exploring how managers in the NHS use knowledge and learning from various sources to apply to develop and improve management practice. In doing so, it recognises that NHS management is made up of various different groups, including clinical, functional and general managers, and that these groups may rely on different sources for guidance on how best to manage. The study also recognises that what managers perceive to be valuable management knowledge varies and is affected by their background, role and organisational practices.

We interviewed 68 managers across three different types of trust in the NHS and observed their participation in different knowledge networks. Our research led us to differentiate between three broad groups of managers who represented very different experiences of management practice. We examined their various backgrounds and how this affected how they acquired and applied management knowledge. We also explored the networks they relied on in their daily practice. Our findings led us to make a number of recommendations regarding management development and organisational support.

The main findings of the research stressed the highly diverse sources of knowledge, learning, experience and networks drawn upon by distinct management groups (clinical, general and functional), the particular challenges facing general managers in establishing a distinct professional identity based around a coherent managerial knowledge base, the strong tendency for managers’ knowledge to be more ‘home grown’ (localised) and experiential (as opposed to abstract and codified) and the tendency for this to be reinforced through the difficulties facing general managers in being actively engaged in wider networks of professionals for knowledge sharing, learning and support.
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This report

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HS&DR programme or one of its proceeding programmes as project number 09/1002/29. The contractual start date was in September 2010. The final report began editorial review in March 2013 and was accepted for publication in September 2013. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HS&DR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' report and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the final report document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this report.

This report presents independent research funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR). The views and opinions expressed by authors in this publication are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health. If there are verbatim quotations included in this publication the views and opinions expressed by the interviewees are those of the interviewees and do not necessarily reflect those of the authors, those of the NHS, the NIHR, NETSCC, the HS&DR programme or the Department of Health.

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