

Developing a high-performance support workforce in acute care: innovation, evaluation and engagement

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Plain English summary

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As the main bedside presence in acute health care, the unregistered nurse support worker, positioned at Agenda for Change pay bands 2 to 4 and assisting the registered nurse, has assumed increased importance in delivering high-quality care in the context of resource constraints. Building upon earlier National Institute for Health Research-funded research, the current study centres on three themes related to such workers. An **innovation theme**, exploring new approaches to the management and use of support workers, is based on scoping discussions and a survey on the incidence of innovative policy and practice, and six cases highlighting how and why certain trusts are able to innovate. An **evaluation** stream assesses the impact of six support worker-related initiatives on different outcomes and actors. An **engagement** stream brings together stakeholders with the aim of sharing 'good practice' and examining ways to further develop the use and management of support workers. The findings suggest that developing a high-performance support workforce in acute care is fraught with difficulties: trusts' attempts to develop this part of the workforce are often resisted, lost in dealing with other priorities, or drawn into complex procedures often associated with clinical governance. However, the study draws lessons from the three streams of work, suggesting the need for a balance between top-down and bottom-up approaches; sensitivity to service needs in extending support roles; and partnership working and inclusive approaches to change.

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