

NHS managers' use of nursing workforce planning and deployment technologies: a realist synthesis

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Plain English summary

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NHS managers need to ensure that there are enough nursing staff so that patients can have safe, good-quality care. Several tools are available to help. These can be used for planning future staffing by forecasting how many nurses with certain skills are required. In real time, tools can also identify the care patients need and the numbers of nurses available. These are often accessed via computers or handheld devices, but may be in paper form. However, the tools may have limited use as a result of changing patient requirements and reductions in staff availability.

This study aimed to find what may work to support NHS managers to use these tools. The study group reviewed what is known about their use and sought the views of NHS managers, patients and experts. This stakeholder work led to the development of a theory, or idea, about how or why these tools work in different contexts. This was tested by looking at what has been written about this topic in scientific journals and other sources, and conducting further interviews with NHS managers.

The findings suggest that NHS managers have information for effective staffing decisions when tools display standardised information on patient needs, staff availability and other topics (such as costs). This information, when used for comparison with other areas, can result in learning. Health organisations need to ensure that safe staffing is supported across all aspects of its work. In addition, NHS managers should be involved in the development of tools so that these are fit for purpose.

NHS managers need support from leaders to develop the skills to use these tools. However, NHS managers have to understand local needs and 'know their staff' to use the tools for effective decision-making. Tools can publicly identify how the number of staff on duty compares with the recommended levels. NHS managers need support in order to communicate this information effectively.

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