

The Safer Nursing Care Tool as a guide to nurse staffing requirements on hospital wards: observational and modelling study

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Plain English summary

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Plain English summary

Many hospitals in England use the Safer Nursing Care Tool to help them decide the numbers of nurses and support workers to employ on wards. The nurse in charge assesses the patients who are on the ward and categorises them depending on how severely ill and dependent on nursing care they are. The tool provides nursing time estimates for each patient category and is used to decide how many nurses to employ. There is very little evidence about the use of this tool.

We used the tool to calculate the staff required every day in four hospital trusts. We looked to see if nurses were more likely to report that they had enough staff when they had the number estimated by the tool. After taking into account other factors that could affect this relationship, we found that when there are fewer staff than the tool suggests are needed, the chance of nurses reporting 'enough staff for quality' is lower. However, other factors not considered in the tool (ward type, single rooms, day of the week, time of day) also affect reported staffing adequacy.

The tool's guidelines suggest employing enough staff to meet demand on an average day. We compared this with higher, and lower, staffing levels using temporary staff to meet shortfalls. We developed a computer program that simulates the staff required, staff available and staff reassigned to other wards, in addition to the hiring of extra temporary staff. Employing fewer nursing staff can be cheaper but often there are not enough staff on the wards because temporary staff cannot make up the shortfall. This increases the risk of death and longer hospital stays for patients. Although it is more expensive, we found that employing more staff, at the level needed to meet the demand observed on 90% of days, could provide value for money because outcomes were improved at modest cost.

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This report

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