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Synopsis

A model of occupational stress to assess impact of COVID-19 on critical care and redeployed nurses: a mixed-methods study

Janice Rattray,^{1,2*} Jordan Miller,² Beth Pollard,² Louise McCallum,³ Alastair Hull,⁴ Pam Ramsay,¹ Lisa Salisbury,⁵ Teresa Scott,⁶ Stephen Cole⁷ and Diane Dixon^{8*}

¹School of Health Sciences, University of Dundee, Dundee, Scotland

²Institute of Applied Health Sciences, School of Medicine, Medical Sciences and Nutrition, University of Aberdeen, Aberdeen, Scotland

³Nursing and Health Care School, Nursing and Health Care, University of Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland

⁴Institute of Medical Sciences, University of Dundee, Dundee, Scotland

⁵School of Health Sciences, Queen Margaret University, Musselburgh, Scotland

⁶NHS Grampian, Aberdeen Royal Infirmary, Critical Care Unit, Foresterhill Health Campus, Aberdeen, Scotland

⁷NHS Tayside, Anaesthesia and Intensive Care Medicine, Ninewells Hospital, Dundee, Scotland

⁸School of Applied Sciences, Edinburgh Napier University, Edinburgh, Scotland

*Corresponding authors d.dixon@napier.ac.uk and j.z.rattray@dundee.ac.uk

Disclaimer: This report contains transcripts of interviews conducted in the course of the research, or similar, and contains language which may offend some readers.

Published December 2024

DOI: 10.3310/PWRT8714

Plain language summary

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Health and Social Care Delivery Research 2025; Vol. 13: No. 23

DOI: 10.3310/PWRT8714

NIHR Journals Library www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk

Plain language summary

This study used a model of occupational stress to explore the experiences of nurses who worked in intensive care during the pandemic and its impact on them and the NHS. The study used: (1) a survey to measure nurses' mental health, characteristics of their job during the pandemic and outcomes important to the NHS and (2) interviews to explore their individual experiences. Survey results were compared to a similar pre-pandemic survey from 2018. The survey involved around a third of all critical care nurses in Scotland and additional nurses in England and Wales.

Compared to 2018, nurses were at six times the risk of psychological distress; a third reported concerning symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Nurses perceived a reduction in care quality and patient safety during the pandemic. Over a quarter of nurses were planning to change jobs in the next year. More favourable organisational outcomes (such as higher job satisfaction and reduced desire to change jobs) were associated with improved learning opportunities, the belief that the organisation was focused on staff well-being and quality of patient care. Interviews with nurses provided illustrative examples of these experiences and support the survey findings.

Dissemination events identified continuing staffing issues and lack of learning and development opportunities as problematic, with nurses concerned about the future delivery of high-quality critical care services. Positive aspects were identified, for example, reduced bureaucratic systems, increased local autonomy and decision-making, and recognition of critical care nurses' skill set. There was a strong sense that NHS culture needs to change to become a more open and caring environment.

The NHS and Government need to consider how to meaningfully improve the critical care workplace. There is a need to continue to monitor staff stress and mental health, offer support to staff to recover, engage nurses in decision-making in relation to their working environment, and promote work environments conducive to building upon individual and team resilience.

Health and Social Care Delivery Research

ISSN 2755-0079 (Online)

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Editorial contact: journals.library@nihr.ac.uk

This journal was previously published as *Health Services and Delivery Research* (Volumes 1–9); ISSN 2050-4349 (print), ISSN 2050-4357 (online)

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This article

The research reported in this issue of the journal was funded by the HSDR programme or one of its preceding programmes as award number NIHR132068. The contractual start date was in October 2020. The draft manuscript began editorial review in January 2023 and was accepted for publication in April 2024. The authors have been wholly responsible for all data collection, analysis and interpretation, and for writing up their work. The HSDR editors and production house have tried to ensure the accuracy of the authors' manuscript and would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive comments on the draft document. However, they do not accept liability for damages or losses arising from material published in this article.

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