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Evidence Brief
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Introducing the Professional Judgement Framework to guide nurse staffing decisions

Working out how many nursing staff are needed to provide safe care on a hospital ward is complicated, as many factors affect the amount of work. Many tools are available to help estimate the work and the staff needed, but no single tool captures everything, meaning that using professional judgement remains important. Nonetheless, numbers of nursing staff generated by tools may be trusted more than decisions based on professional judgement, which can be seen as too subjective. Providing a framework to help guide new managers in using professional judgement and to help experienced managers justify their thinking may help overcome this challenge.

This Evidence Brief describes the development of a Professional Judgement Framework to guide nurse staffing decisions, based on our safe staffing research and nurse workforce expert guidance.

Tools for nurse staffing decisions

Working out how many nursing staff are needed for safe care on a hospital ward is complicated. A safe number of staff depends on patient needs, contextual factors (such as ward size), staff experience and education[1, 2]. Nursing involves doing multiple things at once, often carrying out unobservable work such as critical thinking, responding to emerging demands and prioritizing tasks[3]. The needs and numbers of patients are frequently changing and can be unpredictable[4].

There are many tools to help estimate the number of nursing staff needed, including validated and endorsed tools (e.g. the Safer Nursing Care Tool, SNCT), but no single tool captures everything[1, 2]. Therefore, current guidance stresses that professional judgement (i.e. using individuals' knowledge and experience to help reach a decision) and triangulation (i.e. comparing the results from multiple sources of information) should be used[5]. This means that staff numbers calculated using a tool may be revised up or down based on other information.

However, when communicating decisions about staffing requirements (e.g. presenting business cases), numbers from objective tools may be trusted more than professional judgement, which can be seen as too subjective, biased and not based on facts[6]. There is a lack of guidance around how to apply professional judgement, with experienced staff relying on tacit knowledge, often without resources to help justify their thinking. Less experienced staff in particular lack guidelines to help them[7].

This evidence brief summarises our research around the use of staffing tools and outlines our work with experts to develop a 'Professional Judgement Framework'[8]. The Framework aims to help guide those responsible for making staffing decisions to consider important factors alongside output from a staffing tool to inform staffing requirements.

The importance of professional judgement

We undertook a programme of research into the SNCT [5, 9], the most-used tool in England for estimating the number of nursing staff to assign to a ward (i.e. the 'establishment') [10]. The SNCT works by categorising patients according to the acuity (severity) of their condition and their dependency on nursing care, and assigning corresponding workload scores.

We found that the SNCT provides a measure of nursing workload that correlates with professional judgements of staffing adequacy[11]. However, other factors were also correlated with professional judgements of staffing adequacy, for example, ward type (e.g. surgical, medical or mixed) and the proportion of single rooms. We also found that for some wards, using the SNCT gave a reliable estimate of the number of nursing staff needed[12]. However, for other wards, relying on the estimate provided by this tool without applying professional judgement could lead to unsafe staffing levels for several reasons. For example, the current guidance recommends setting staffing levels to meet the ward average requirement, but following this logic, 18 out of 69 wards in the three Trusts we studied would often have been short-staffed (more than 15% below SNCT daily staffing recommendation). Also, a quarter of wards needed more than 6 months of staffing information to estimate the number of staff needed precisely, when the current recommendation is to use 20-30 days of staffing data to set the ward establishment.

Nursing workforce leaders from three Trusts suggested other characteristics of wards where the tool performed least well, for instance, high rate of patient admissions/discharges and differences in workload between mornings and evenings.

Developing a Professional Judgement Framework

We worked with nurses experienced in safe staffing and workforce issues, both at a national and local level, to develop a Professional Judgement Framework incorporating both their expertise and research findings. This framework has been endorsed by the National Quality Board and is being used in the NHS England Safer Staffing Fellowship programme[13].

Contents of the Professional Judgement Framework

The Professional Judgement Framework consists of a staffing review cycle and a series of questions to consider alongside advice.

- Reviewing staffing is a continuous process to **measure** the acuity/dependency of patients on the ward; **review** this data and consider results using professional judgement (e.g. using the Framework); **compare** the calculated establishment against similar wards and consider why it may be different**; reflect** on the calculated establishment using evidence and what it means for daily deployment of staff; **justify** your decision about the establishment; **monitor** changes on the ward and indicators of insufficient nurse staffing e.g. patient and staff outcomes; **measure** acuity/dependency again when needed.

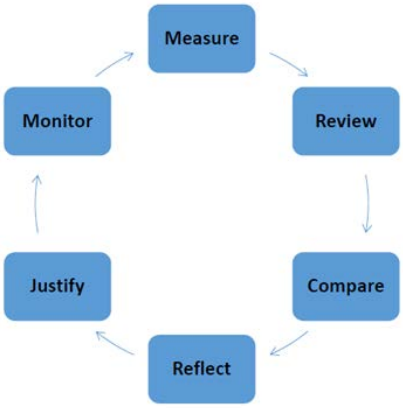


FIGURE 1: THE STAFFING REVIEW CYCLE

The questions are grouped under headings:

- **Initial sense-checks;** for example do the numbers of staff seem right and has the ward changed?
- **Accuracy of measurements** including sample size of measurements and experience of the staff conducting the measurement.
- **Particularities of nursing work** on this ward including use of one-to-one care and ward layout (e.g. bays/single rooms).
- **Local staffing context** such as shift patterns, skills and experience of staff.

Conclusion

Staffing tools are useful aids for workload decisions, but their results are starting points to be questioned because not all aspects of workload can be measured. New managers may use the Professional Judgement Framework to guide their thinking around nurse staffing decisions. Experienced managers may use the Framework to provide evidence and structure around their decisions.

Resources

- The importance of professional judgement in nurse staffing decisions (http://bit.ly/importance_professional_judgement_video)
- The problem with using averages when planning staffing (https://bit.ly/problem_averages_video)
- Computer simulation: what and why? (https://sho.co/1E34T)

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