

## Improving emergency department retention and recruitment – case studies

### Leading with empathy

#### East Lancashire Hospitals NHS Trust

#### What was the problem?

The emergency department (ED) has struggled for some years with frequent changes in managers and significant turnover of nursing and support staff. This made safely staffing the ED a challenge. It also meant that systems and processes were not embedded, impacting on effective management of patients through the ED.

The ED was experiencing staff sickness absence rates of 12-13% and a turnover rate of 15%. The trust was having difficulties recruiting registered nurses with the right skills to safely staff the department. Most of the staff were newly qualified nurses with little experience, adding more pressure in an already challenging environment.

On average, there are 600 attendances across the trust's three sites, including 150 ambulance admissions. The department is challenged by exit block which causes overcrowding in the ED, exerting additional pressure on staff to manage a difficult and demanding cohort of patients.

It became evident that the main cause of sickness and absence was stress; staff felt the trust could do more to reduce this.

#### What was the solution?

The trust invested £750,000 to recruit qualified nurses in 2017; yet this recruitment took more than 18 months. Recognising that most of their nurses were newly qualified, they included a training and development strategy, to support and nurture them. The trust sought to further increase establishment of nurses, to ensure the right people with the right skills are caring for patients.

#### Career development and RCEM accreditation

A strategy was implemented to ensure development opportunities were available to nursing staff, with several initiatives to embed trained emergency nurse practitioners (ENPs) and advanced clinical practitioners (ACPs) into the wider workforce. Heavy investment in ACPs



has taken place with an additional four trainees for the academic year. When the current staff group have completed their training, the trust will have a team of 20 ACPs and paediatric ACPs who will see all presentations of the department.

Established practitioners are currently working within the team to undertake their Royal College of Emergency Medicine accreditation. The trust is rolling out a plan for all ACPs to undertake this programme, to enhance their skills and help towards the next level of practitioners. This means practitioners are better equipped to manage presentations in ED and support the novice ACPs and trainee practitioners. They are also considering adding nurse consultant roles to the ED to complement the clinical team and provide a clear career plan for advanced clinicians.

The next task is to expand the number of ENP training posts available. Doing so will mean trainees divide their time evenly between working as an ENP and working in their usual roles as nurse coordinators. The decision to split this role came from increased awareness among leadership of the emotional labour associated with the ENP and nurse coordinator roles, and it was felt this split would help staff enhance their skills. It is planned that ENPs will be rotated across all three sites.

## **Seeking feedback**

Alongside this, the trust has listened to the nursing team's concerns and ideas. They have chosen to move away from the conventional long days for a cohort of staff. The team are piloting shorter shifts with a variety of start and finish times. This aims to support the patient profile of the department and help retain skilled staff with flexible working. This is working well and complements a number of 'flexible working agreements' within the department for nursing and support staff.

The senior nursing team collected feedback from staff, using the staff survey as a benchmark. To do this, the team used (and continues to use) an online survey to gain live feedback from staff, and canvassed opinions via a closed Facebook page, to ensure that they are managing an evolving workforce.

## **Wellbeing**

The senior team at East Lancashire have invested an amount of money into a 'retreat' which is an area for staff to take time out, relax and reflect on an incident, or to take some time away. As well as this, staff now have support from the trust's staff guardian and the wellbeing team, who are working directly with the ED team to reduce work-related stress.

Analysis of sickness data identified the main causes of absence from work as stress and musculoskeletal conditions. The trust has now embedded a new service whereby if a staff member calls in sick, this is recorded electronically, and staff are contacted the same day for physio and counselling support. This has had a tangible impact in the department. More locally, the ED has access to a sports masseur who attends regularly to provide advice and treatment to staff.

## What were the challenges?

There were some challenging leadership issues in the ED which the new senior management team has worked hard to address, embedding compassionate leadership in the department. Discord within the team meant clinicians and nursing staff were not working well together which impacted on the department negatively. Disorganisation in the ED impacted negatively on communication within the department and contributed to delays, having a negative influence on patient outcomes and experience.

Targeted training and support have been provided for senior nursing and consultant colleagues, ensuring that all the senior team are working towards the same goal (achieving the four-hour target in a collaborative way).

With issues of overcrowding in ED, it is important not to underestimate the negative impact on patients, outcomes and staff morale. The trust was committed to working with the wider system to embed sustainable change to help to reduce this.

## What were the results?

- Nursing vacancies have reduced massively. The trust is now in a position that they have a waiting list for staff to come and work for them and is looking to increase the nursing workforce again in response to an increase in the department footprint. There are a small number of vacancies in the department, but this is due to some recent promotion and will be mitigated by the 'waiting list' of staff who want to work with the trust.
- Sickness absence has improved significantly with a reciprocal improvement in bank and agency nursing spend.
- Results from staff survey and six-monthly internal feedback collections continue to be positive with an upward trajectory. This is fantastic, and testament to the hard work that has been undertaken to embed change in the department.
- The Trust has an assessment framework which is aligned to the CQCs key lines of enquiry. The department was assessed initially (approximately 18 months ago), and

received an 'inadequate' rating. However, recent assessments gave the departments 'good' ratings, while both urgent care centres and the minor injuries unit were rated 'outstanding'. This demonstrates the sea-change in the department with a marked improvement in the care provided to the patients of East Lancashire.

## What were the learning points?

- Persistence pays.
- Do not underestimate the challenge.
- Look after yourself during the journey and make sure you manage your resilience.
- Authenticity is key and staff are more receptive to change when it is delivered by people with direct experience of tackling the issues in question.
- Change in large teams is very challenging – especially alongside the day job of caring for huge numbers of patients and maintaining statutory targets. It is important to acknowledge that large scale change sometimes means staff move on, and that is ok.
- Compassionate leadership is essential to grow and nurture the team into people who are committed to making a difference. However, it is important to remember that sometimes there are difficult conversations to be had which are challenging for all.

## Next steps and sustainability

The trust is already seeing the benefits of all the work, and staff are much more engaged and happier to be working in the ED. The vision is to continue the improvement work and to make the changes 'business as usual'. It has been a challenge, but all are seeing the hard work come to fruition.

As well as improving retention, the trust is maintaining >95% in urgent care. When there is flow through the trust, the ED works well, despite the increasing demands faced.

## Want to know more?

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