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## Developing a high performance support workforce in an acute healthcare setting

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*Support workers such as healthcare assistants and assistant practitioners are assuming increasing importance in the delivery of acute care. In recent years, a recalibration of nursing and clinical responsibilities has seen them performing a broad array of direct care tasks. As acute healthcare faces new and even more intense pressures to change, the nature, management and consequence of the support workforce are likely to become topics of keen interest to policy makers, trust managers, staff representatives and other practitioners. This note presents details of a new research project which seeks to assist these stakeholders in developing a high performance support workforce.*

### Support worker research

The project, funded from April 2011 by the National Institute for Health Research SDO programme, builds upon two recently completed studies of the support workforce in acute healthcare:

- The nature and consequences of support worker roles at pay bands 2 & 3 (Kessler et al, 2010, University of Oxford)
- The development and impact of assistant practitioner roles at pay band 4 (Spilsbury et al, 2010, University of York)

### Previous findings

The University of Oxford and York studies found that while the support worker role was crucial to improved productivity, service delivery and the patient care experience, acute trusts still faced difficulties and challenges in managing the support workforce. There were pockets of innovative practice, but a range of concerns were highlighted including:

- the concentration of support workers in pay band 2 posts suggested the role was mainly being used to minimise labour costs;
- the alignment between pay band, qualification and tasks performed was often highly distorted;
- practices for inducting, training, involving and performance managing support workers were uneven between trusts and sometimes under developed;
- the number of assistant practitioners to be found on any given ward was small; and
- systems for planning the support workforce and for clarifying the distribution and delegation of tasks remained weak.

The studies concluded that there were significant service and healthcare gains to be made by acute trusts using support roles to their full potential, but that challenges remained in doing so.

## Overview of new research

The new project will involve Oxford and York researchers working together to identify and explore ways in which support roles can be more efficiently and effectively designed, used, and managed by acute trusts.

The central aims of the project are:

- To identify and facilitate the development of innovative and sustainable management and working practices as it relates to support roles in acute healthcare.
- To test and evaluate various trust policies and practices which involve support worker interaction with other team members and patients, so providing a stronger evidence base for their use.
- To engage various stakeholders – support workers themselves, registered nurses, ward managers, other trust managers, patients and carers – in sharing knowledge, practice and learning on support worker roles.
- To devise further means of assistance and guidance for stakeholders in the design, development and management of support worker roles, particularly in the form of a toolkit.

## Research streams

To achieve these aims the project will be structured around three research streams:

- 1. Innovation:** What form has sustainable innovative practice in the design, organisation and management of support worker roles taken? Where is this innovative practice to be found within and between trusts? What explains its emergence? How is it sustained?
- 2. Evaluation:** To what extent do selective management practices improve stakeholder interaction with support worker roles?
- 3. Engagement:** How might stakeholder knowledge and experience contribute to the development of support worker roles? How might this information be used to design tools enabling stakeholders to engage more efficiently and effectively with them?

Researchers will work with acute trusts across England, applying research methods which generate qualitative and quantitative data. The project will provide trusts with an evidence base on the role and management of support workers in acute care.

## Project team and contact details

The project team consists of researchers from the Saïd Business School, University of Oxford and the Department of Health Sciences at the University of York, bringing together expertise from the fields of nursing and healthcare management, human resource management and patient experiences of healthcare.

Previous study reports and current research documentation can be found on the project website:

[www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/research/supportworkers/](http://www.sbs.ox.ac.uk/research/supportworkers/)

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