

Nursing and nurses: the image and the reality

Vicky Morris reports on the development of a marketing campaign on the image of nursing to increase public confidence in care provision, and to recruit and retain more nurses

Summary

This article describes national and regional processes, and the evidence base developed from a series of engagement and involvement events across the NHS, to develop an effective marketing campaign and a framework for regional strategies to recruit and retain nurses. The consultation and engagement process was also designed to ensure that the campaign would be supported by the workforce. It will be of interest to the independent and voluntary sectors and, while relating to English strategy and policy, it is pertinent to the whole of the UK and internationally.

Keywords

Nursing, public confidence, marketing, strategy, framework

NHS WEST Midlands has been working with NHS London on the image of nursing. To this end, the two organisations have formed a 'coalition board'.

The project on the image of nursing is part of the Department of Health (DH) (2006) Modernising Nursing Careers initiative. It is a timely and essential stream of work to improve public confidence in nurses and the quality of care provision, and is intended to align levels of public confidence in nursing with those of the nursing workforce.

The work being undertaken by the coalition board will dovetail with similar reviews being undertaken by the DH, which is developing a strategy to determine the constituents of a typically good nurse.

From a national perspective, the report, *Nursing in Society: Starting the Debate* (Maben and Griffiths 2008), suggests that the nursing profession has lost direction and that there is unacceptable variation in the quality of care.

The report also notes that the standard of nursing is generally high but, where it falls short, it affects how patients judge their experiences of health services overall.

The coalition board was established in 2008 and has developed a programme to ensure that the recommendations from the *Nursing in Society* report are implemented successfully.

One of the recommendations was that a national recruitment and retention marketing campaign, similar to those for the armed forces and for teachers, should be launched. The success of this campaign depends on credible evaluations by current workforces.

Local reviews

As part of the coalition board's work, NHS West Midlands director of nursing and workforce Peter Blythin commissioned a local review of the image of nursing using the same methodology as an earlier DH study (Dawoud and Maben 2008) so that perceptions about nurses in different health economies could be compared.

In this review, questionnaires comprising four open questions were circulated to all the acute and primary care trusts in the West Midlands. The questions were:

- What is good quality nursing?
- What aspects of the role do you value and care most about?
- What threats and challenges do you think the nursing role faces today?
- What do you think can be done to strengthen those aspects of the nursing role that you care about and what would you propose?

The 198 respondents, who included nursing students, recently registered nurses, experienced nurses, senior nurses and ward managers, educators and senior managers, covered a range of primary and secondary care roles, and a range of clinical specialties. An adapted questionnaire was

Box 1 Recommendations derived from the literature review

- Encourage agreement between nurses, other care professionals and the public about how they perceive nursing, possibly using a model based on body image, that is, reality, presentation and ideal (Price 1990).
- Improve how care professionals perceive nursing at pre-registration level through interprofessional learning while students work in academic settings, simulated practice settings and clinical placements.
- Promote nursing as a career choice with school-aged children, and encourage careers counsellors in schools and colleges to use targeted campaigns.
- Implement and publicise recent fundamental developments in nursing such as the move to all-graduate entry to the register, regulation of advanced practice roles, the promotion of clinical academic careers, and the opportunities for postgraduate education and training.

also sent out to allied health professionals, doctors and trust board directors to gather their views.

The responses revealed a need for change and for practical solutions to local problems in organisations.

One important aspect of the local review was the development, through a systematic literature review, of an evidence base (Box 1). This literature review was led by head of the school of nursing and midwifery at Keele University, Staffordshire, Rebecca Jester.

These recommendations supported the views of coalition board members and the conclusions of national reports that the profession may require fundamental changes before the image of nursing can be modified.

The outcomes of the literature review were reflected in a regional report entitled *A West Midlands Perspective: Starting the Debate* (Morris 2009). This report stimulated discussion among coalition board members about what actions were required to encourage students and registered nurses, as well as members of the public, to see nursing as a lifelong career.

The coalition board evaluated the findings and, in association with a business consultancy, arranged focus groups to discuss the messages that would be required in a national marketing campaign.

The coalition board wanted to ensure that this campaign would:

- Attract the right people to become nurses.
- Maintain and promote the highest standards of practice.
- Support and motivate current nurses.
- Enhance perceptions among other healthcare professionals, decision makers and opinion leaders.

Improve public opinion of the profession. Workshops were held also across NHS London so that nurses from primary care, acute and specialist trusts, and from universities, could air their views about the public perception of nursing.

Focus group discussions and individual interviews involving career teachers were also conducted, and meetings were held with journalists and doctors

from a range of specialties so that their ideas about nursing could be examined.

Themes

Several themes concerning the poor perceptions of nurses and nursing emerged. For example, a distinction was thought to exist between nursing, which the public recognises as requiring dedication, and as honourable and vital in society, and the realities of being a nurse.

Despite positive views about nursing, the role of nurses was thought to be seen as menial and nurses were thought to be seen at the bottom of the NHS hierarchy, with less responsibility than ever before, and concerned with nasty, dirty and unpleasant tasks (Box 2).

In addition, it was believed that most people outside the profession were ignorant of, for example, nurses' levels of education and pay, and of career diversity and specialisms in the profession.

Aspects of the reality of being a nurse that the public deem important are shown in Figure 1, page 18. Each aspect significant in its own right, but together they also create a powerful whole.

Three 'messaging territories' (Box 3, page 18) based on these themes were developed, and research is under way with target audiences, namely schoolchildren, teachers, parents, students, mature

Box 2 How nurses think the public perceives them

- The physical nature of working as a nurse: unpleasant, dirty, menial and difficult.
- The requirements needed to become a nurse: incorrect and outdated.
- The role of a nurse: passive and subservient to doctors.
- The personality and character of individual nurses: based on media clichés.
- The career and working life of a nurse: lacking in variety, freedom and progress.
- The rewards of being a nurse: financial, personal, rational and emotional.

Figure 1 Aspects of the reality of being a nurse that are deemed important to changing public perceptions



‘career switchers’ as well as nurses, to identify those with the most potential for bringing knowledge and attitudes into line with reality.

Each territory summarises an aspect of nursing that can motivate an individual to be a nurse, addresses and contradicts misperceptions about the profession, and represents a source of pride and satisfaction to nurses, thereby enticing others to become nurses.

The coalition board agreed that its national recruitment campaign should reflect the reality of nursing to ensure that any subsequent marketing, career advice or recruitment campaigns would also be viewed as realistic by those working in the profession, as well as members of the public and in the media.

NHS West Midlands commissioned a Delphi study, supported by Keele University to underpin the work of the coalition board with a solid evidence base.

The Delphi technique is a way of achieving a consensus on a subject by obtaining and circulating the opinions and judgements of experts, and then asking participants whether they think these are valid.

Taking into account the findings, questions were identified (Table 1) to inform the next stage of the project. The Delphi study questionnaires were sent

to all acute and primary care trusts in the West Midlands and a range of trusts in London.

Two hundred and twenty eight responses were reviewed to develop a range of statements for use in the second stage of the Delphi process. Participants then ranked the statements from the most to the least important.

The priority for attracting and recruiting the best candidates to nursing was to promote the profession’s high standards and show that nurses take pride in their work, and provide the best care and treatment. This desire to provide high standards of care was also thought to be the most important quality the profession should seek when recruiting people into nursing.

There was a clear need to promote positive role models through national and local media to show that there is a huge variety of career prospects in the nursing profession.

In considering the successful promotion of nursing as a career choice to people over the age of 25, it was thought that stories of people who had entered the profession as mature students should be provided. These stories would focus on their motivation for becoming nurses and their successes since doing so. They would also highlight nurses’ pay parity with police officers and fire service members, and use male role models if appropriate.

One of the main challenges faced by the coalition board concerned how to increase understanding by members of the public and other healthcare professionals about the education, training and regulation of nurses.

The Delphi process revealed that nurses need to have a higher profile, be proud of their profession and want to share their experiences with others, and that they need to promote their education and regulatory frameworks and standards. To do this however, they must have and maintain a positive view of the nursing role.

The study also showed a consensus that having optimum staffing levels is the most appropriate way of ensuring a happier workforce, but also

Box 3 The three messaging territories

- Practical characteristics and benefits of being a nurse: financial, lifestyle, personal development and opportunities.
- A statement of challenge: not everyone can reach the high standards that nursing demands.
- The privilege of being a nurse: opportunities, freedom, flexibility, control, education, skills, qualifications, unique satisfactions, fun, having a unique position in people’s lives.

Table 1 The Delphi study

Themes	The study questions
Promoting nursing as a positive career choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How do we attract and recruit the best people into the nursing profession? ■ What are the most important qualities and skills we should seek when recruiting people into nursing? ■ How do we promote nursing as a positive career choice to school-aged children and young people? ■ How do we promote nursing as a positive career choice to mature people? ■ How do we promote nursing as a positive career choice to men?
Improving the image of nurses and nursing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ How do we increase understanding by the public and other healthcare professionals about the education, training and regulation of nurses? ■ How do we instil and maintain a positive view of the nursing role from within the profession itself? ■ How do we promote and maintain a positive view of the nursing role and nurses from the public and other healthcare professions?
Matching the image and reality of nursing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What changes could be made to ensure nurses are able to spend more time in direct, high quality patient care? ■ What changes could be made to improve the working lives of nurses? ■ What strategies are needed to retain good nurses in the profession?

that allowing time for adequate professional and role development is important in increasing job satisfaction. Having visibly effective and honest communication both ways between managers and staff and managers taking time to speak to all staff were also considered important.

Three themes concerning how best to promote and maintain a positive view of the nursing role and of nurses emerged from the public and healthcare professionals.

The first of these themes was the need to manage poorly performing nurses robustly, and to support them constructively either to improve or to leave the profession.

The second theme was the need for openness and honesty, and a belief that 'getting the basics right' would result in the public having good nursing care experiences, which they would then share across their social communities.

The third theme was a belief that having optimum staffing levels in clinical areas would give patients the time they need with nurses, which would reassure relatives and carers that patients receive the care they need.

When asked what changes would improve the working lives of nurses, members of the public and other healthcare professionals thought that having adequate staffing levels and skill mix would increase job satisfaction by relieving pressure and stress.

There was consensus that strategies to retain nurses in the profession should focus on staff

development, career progression, allowing staff to develop in their roles and ensuring that front line staff had the knowledge and skills to provide good care.

Coalition board members have evaluated these results and are considering a national marketing campaign while continuing to work on regional strategies in the West Midlands and London.

The coalition board has discussed this work with the Patients Association and will continue to work with service users to align the public's perceptions about nursing with those of the nursing workforce.

Recognising and acting on the findings of this national project on the image of nursing is timely and essential work to improve public confidence in nurses and the quality of care provision.

Find out more

Visit the Directors of Nursing homepage at <http://don.westmidlands.nhs.uk>

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