

# Health Care Support Workers

## Get it Right - RIGHT SKILLS

The term Health Care Support Worker (HCSW) covers a wide range of roles including portering, catering, administrative and clerical staff as well as those in assistant roles to health professionals. In fact the term 'health care support worker' is not universally applied so that people undertaking the same work and role may be known variously as health care assistants, care assistants or support workers, or nursing assistants, physiotherapy assistants etc. In this briefing the term health care support worker will be used but the discussion applies only to HCSWs who work alongside nurses to provide direct clinical care, within hospitals, community settings and care homes.

HCSWs whose routine duties are delegated to them by a registered nurse or who have a health and social care qualification, are part of the nursing family and are eligible for membership of the Royal College of Nursing. HCSWs provide essential nursing care (e.g. bathing, helping patients to eat, pressure area care) as well as technical clinical work (e.g. recording patient observations, taking blood samples, dressings and wound care). Research and anecdotal evidence shows that support workers can work at relatively simple or at a wide range of levels of practice dependent on their range of experience and with appropriate delegation by a registered nurse (who remains professionally accountable for the appropriateness of the delegation). All members of the nursing team regardless of qualifications take ownership of a shared vision which is to provide quality care.

HCSWs are not currently regulated. There are no statutory educational, professional or training requirements for a HCSW. The only requirements are those imposed by the current employer. This is in contrast to nurses who are a regulated profession (by the Nursing and Midwifery Council). The RCN believes that HCSWs should also be regulated. A regulated profession allows the public to have confidence that a person found guilty of misconduct and removed from the professional list by the regulator cannot take up professional employment again elsewhere.

The National Framework for the Education and Training of HCSWs was launched in 2006. Within the NHS each employee should have a Knowledge and Skills outline showing the competencies they have achieved and those they should be working towards. The difficulty is that not all posts have yet been given these outlines and very few employees have had the opportunity to be assessed against them. Furthermore even once the employee has had their training needs assessed provision for training across the different health organisation in Wales is mixed. The Royal College of Nursing believes that HCSWs undertake skilled work which is valued highly by patients. Their role should be supported with the recognition of competency and experience and access to further education and training.

## KEY POLICY ACTIONS

- The Royal College of Nursing believes that all HCSWs should, for public protection be regulated and that those who deliver clinical care as part of the nursing team should be regulated by the Nursing and Midwifery Council.
- The Welsh Assembly Government should set NHS health organisations educational targets for their HCSWs and monitor qualification levels through the Electronic Staff Record.
- The Welsh Assembly Government should promote equitable and meaningful access to education for HCSWs in the independent sector.

