

PRO-JUDGE Lay Summary

What is the story about?

Ensuring enough nurses are available to care for patients is an important policy concern in many countries. Research has shown a relationship between lower nurse staffing levels and poorer patient outcomes. Many different systems have been developed internationally to support workforce planning and staff deployment. These typically include rostering technologies, formal workload assessment tools, data on patient outcomes, and professional judgment. There is a substantial body of research on the formal tools deployed in staffing systems, but we know very little about the role of professional judgement and its impacts on decision-making. The aim of Pro-Judge was to address this gap in understanding.

What did we do?

Between January 2021 and March 2023, the study focused on three National Health Service Trusts in England and three University Health Boards in Wales. Interviews were conducted with various key individuals involved in the nurse staffing systems, including ward nurses, senior nurse managers, executive nurses, directors of finance, operations managers, and hospital board members. Staffing meetings were observed, and formal documents, tools and technologies were analysed. A limited number of observations in clinical areas were also conducted to gain insights. We combined these data to build up an understanding of the role of professional judgement in the staffing systems in each case.

What did we find?

The findings indicated that professional judgment in nurse staffing systems followed a common pattern. Two types of professional judgment were identified at different levels of the organisation: one based on the understanding of individual clinical areas by clinical nurses, and another based on prior clinical experience, knowledge of staff, and organizational priorities by senior nurse managers. These judgements were combined to make decisions.

At the time of the study, none of the cases had sufficient staff to fulfil planned rosters. In this context, the professional judgements of clinical nurses and senior nurse managers, rather than formal systems, were central to operational decisions to manage risk and ensure care was safe across the organisation.

Staffing levels required for the routine operation of clinical areas were reviewed twice a year and involved nurses, service managers and finance directors in discussions to set standards. In routine reviews of staffing levels, efficiency, safety, and 'hard' data were given considerable weight in decision-making. However, nurses considered that the data did not capture important aspects of the quality of patient care and staff well-being. As a result, nurses found it challenging to articulate their professional judgments and influence decision-making at board level, and their efforts were described as 'emotional' and 'subjective'.

What does this mean?

The study highlights that while nurses are relied upon to use professional judgment to manage risks during staff shortages, their judgments do not carry the same weight when it comes to agreeing on staffing levels at board level. This may result in safe but not necessarily high-quality patient care, which could impact nurse retention and perpetuate staff shortages. To address this, the research suggests the following actions: 1) equipping nurses with a vocabulary to articulate their professional judgment for strategic decision-making, 2) being more inclusive of expert nursing clinical and contextual knowledge in healthcare organisations, and 3) refining staffing systems to generate data that better captures the complexity of care.

What happens next?

We will disseminate our findings in research and policy papers. The research outcomes and recommendations will be shared with senior nurses, policymakers, and researchers during a stakeholder workshop on October 30th, 2023, to consider future steps. A briefing pack will summarize the findings and suggestions for further action.