



Royal College of Nursing

Shaping nursing since 1916

Seven day care

RCN position statement

Seven day care

The RCN supports the vision of a health and care system where people have access to high quality care when and where they need it, no matter the time of day or day of week. Variation in patient care and outcomes is unacceptable and must be addressed. We believe that where people have clinically urgent health care needs, at whatever time, high quality care should be available where they need it most, whether this is in hospital or in the community.

In order to achieve this level and quality of provision it will be necessary for governments and health departments across the UK to work collaboratively with nursing staff, their representative bodies, and their employing organisations. We believe that this needs to address the following issues.

1. Variations in mortality and patient outcomes are unacceptable.

We believe that the public have a right to expect that the treatment and care that they need will be available to them in ways that address their individual circumstances, no matter the time of day or day of the week.

2. There is a need for clarity on what is meant by seven day care across the UK.

It is still not clear whether governments' visions for seven day services apply to all settings, emergency care, elective acute care and/or community and primary care. Recent evidence has called into question the government's claim that hospital mortality rates are worse at weekends.

3. Providing seven day services should be based on clinical analysis and evidence of where seven day care can most improve outcomes for patients before taking it as a given.

This would ensure the best use of resources and the most effective system changes that can manage care across a seven day period, and increase safety and capacity in a sustainable way. Safe nurse staffing levels are critical.

4. There needs to be a whole-systems approach and investment in community services.

The debate cannot just focus on the acute sector. Governments across the UK have set out their vision to move towards caring for people at home or in the community and to avoid admissions to hospital, wherever possible. To do this, investment in the provision of multidisciplinary care in the community, including social care, seven days a week, is vital. Currently, there is no evidence of progress in moving care to the community on the scale required. For example, in England, between May 2010 and May 2014, the community workforce contracted by 3% and, over the same period, there was a 28% reduction in the number of specialist district nurses (a loss of 2,168 posts). There is a similar decline in numbers in Wales and elsewhere.

5. This is a multidisciplinary challenge. Seven day care requires the right workforce in the right place at the right time.

All professions have a role to play. A multidisciplinary approach will improve the flexibility and responsiveness of services. It will also maximise the contribution that each profession brings to delivering the best outcomes for patients seven days a week.

The availability of a skilled and motivated workforce is critical for any plans to deliver seven day care. Consideration must be given to staffing levels, expertise and autonomy, pay, terms, conditions and working patterns of all those likely to be included in the provision of seven day care. This includes the contribution of support and diagnostic services. Access to diagnostics is one of the main barriers to providing an out-of-hours service.

There is no evidence that UK governments have modelled seven day provision, considered the staffing requirements, calculated the costs involved or planned how services could be delivered on a seven day basis.

6. Nursing can provide solutions for the challenges of providing seven day care.

Nursing has continually evolved to meet changing patient needs, improve patient outcomes and deliver effective and responsive care. There are many examples of the professional contribution that nursing makes to help ensure care is provided over seven days. Nurses who work in advanced practice roles can act as senior clinical decision makers, with the authority and clinical expertise to assess, diagnose and treat patients, as well as admit, discharge and make referrals. The delivery of unscheduled and out-of-hours nursing care provides a key role in ensuring that patients with urgent health care needs have timely access to the right care. Nursing also makes a vital contribution to reducing hospital admissions and supporting people to be discharged from hospital, for example, through district and community nursing services.

7. Sufficient and sustainable resources are needed to match this ambition.

To make the vision of seven day care a reality, the NHS needs the planning, organisation and resources to provide enough staff to support the provision of care no matter the time of day or day of the week. However funds are realised, the provision of seven day care will not, and should not, be attempted without adequate and sustainable resourcing. Giving a greater focus to weekends and evening access must not come at the expense of access to services during weekdays. Governments also need to demonstrate how they will deliver investment commitments they have made. For example, in England there is a need to show how the promised £8billion for the NHS in England is to be phased over the next few years and how it will be used to improve care for patients.

8. As the largest workforce in health care, nursing will be affected by any change in the model of care provision.

It is sometimes assumed because many nurses and healthcare support workers already work in a seven day system that their working patterns are more easily reconciled with providing seven day care. However, in many areas, the nursing model is still largely focused on Monday to Friday core hours, with the ratio of staffing and skill mix significantly different outside these core hours. The assumption that the way in which nurses and health care support workers currently work over a seven day period readily translates into a revised model which requires increased resourcing is incorrect and possibly harmful to those receiving and providing care. This aspect requires far greater consideration and scrutiny. A move towards seven day care is likely to require an increase in numbers and a different skill mix across the nursing workforce. Skill mix needs to look at the ratio of professionally qualified nurses to health care support workers, access to senior clinical decision makers and the provision of suitably qualified nurse leaders.

9. Seven day care is likely to have a disproportionate impact on female staff.

The nursing workforce is predominantly female, with a large proportion having caring responsibilities. Research shows that many look after children and grandchildren and an increasing number have caring responsibilities for elderly relatives.

10. Remuneration matters (to staff and patients).

There is a significant shortage of nurses across the UK, most recently highlighted by the report from the Migration Advisory Committee and their recommendation that nursing should be considered a shortage occupation. One factor is the supply of registered nurses relating to historic and recent cuts in training places to save money. However, an important factor is also the impact of ongoing pay constraint on recruitment and retention, with wages not keeping pace with inflation. In addition, nurses and health care support workers must be offered terms and conditions that are commensurate with delivering clinical care at times that many people would find unpalatable. If staff are required to work more weekends, nights and bank holidays their pay must reflect that inconvenience and their commitment to the service.

Nurses and health care support workers also have the right to expect a healthy work-life balance. Funding seven day services by stretching five days of resources over seven, or by cutting payment for unsocial hours will have a negative impact on the morale of a workforce, already overstretched by staff shortages. The evidence shows that poor staff morale ultimately impacts on the quality of patient care. The RCN will defend members' conditions to ensure seven day care is safe for patients and fair for those delivering care.

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