

National Survey on the roles and training of respiratory nurses in the UK

At-a-glance key facts and statistics

Long Term Conditions¹

- 17.5 million adults in the UK and 15 million people in England live with a long term condition for which there is no cure
- 80% of GP consultations and 60% of Hospital bed days relate to long term conditions and due to the aging population this incidence is expected to double over the next 20 years
- 8.8 million people report that their long term illness severely limits their day to day activity
- An estimated two thirds of current NHS activity and 80% of cost relate to the care and treatment of those with long term health conditions

Asthma²

- 5.2 million People in the UK are currently receiving treatment for asthma: 1.1 million children (1 in 10) and 4.1 million adults (1 in 12).
- An estimated 75% of hospital admissions for asthma are avoidable and as many as 90% of the deaths from asthma are preventable.
- Of the 2.6 million people with severe symptoms, approximately 500,000 experience severe symptoms because treatments that are currently available do not effectively manage their asthma.
- The other 2.1 million are suffering unnecessarily because of a failure of asthma management. In these cases effective treatment is available but they do not benefit from it, either because they do not realise it is there and cannot ask for it, they do not use it effectively or because they do not have access to specialist practitioners.
- Asthma costs the NHS over £996 million per year
- Over 12.7 million working days are lost to asthma each year.
- People who do not have a written personal asthma action plan are four times more likely to have an asthma attack requiring emergency hospital treatment

Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) ³

- More than 900,000 people have a diagnosis of COPD although this figure is thought to be much higher with as few as 1 in 4 patients actually having their condition recognised
- The over all quality of life for people with advanced COPD is about 4 times worse than for people with asthma when assessed using similar quality of life questionnaires
- Britain has one of the highest death rates from COPD in Europe – recent figures show about 27,000 people die of COPD and allied conditions each year.
- Hospitalisations with this disease have increased by 50% between 1092 and 2000
- Hospital costs in 2001-2002 amounted to £587m in the UK
- It is estimated that COPD causes at least 20.4 million lost working days amongst men and 3.5 million among women every year. More than any other respiratory condition

Survey findings ⁵

Asthma care: 255 of the 389 lead asthma nurses who returned the questionnaire had an advanced asthma role (they diagnosed asthma and conducted follow-up consultations. However, 51 of these nurses (20%) had no accredited training. Of these 51 nurses, 21 (41%) reported that the GP not always immediately accessible to be referred to if required when they were seeing patients.

COPD care: 215 of the 368 lead COPD nurses who returned the questionnaire had an advanced COPD role (they diagnosed COPD and conducted follow-up consultations. However, 111 of these nurses (51%) had no accredited training. Of these 111 nurses, 50 (45%) reported that the GP not always immediately accessible to be referred to if required when they were seeing patients.

Implications of survey findings

1. The drive to improve the management of long term conditions in primary care has led to increased delegation of the care and management to practice nurses. This survey found that two thirds of asthma nurses undertake an advanced role in the care of patients; 17% higher than reported in 1993. However, this survey suggests that one-fifth of asthma nurses and approximately on half of COPD nurses holding an advanced role do not have accredited training. It would therefore appear from these findings that a large percentage of asthma and COPD nurses have not been trained appropriately; it would also appear that they are often not provided with sufficient supervision to undertake many of their duties.
2. The GMS contract of 2003 recognised that COPD was a significant long term illness and set to raise the standards of care provided by rewarding GPs for providing quality care. It does not currently stipulate the level of training a nurse should have when these tasks are delegated. A COPD National Service Framework is imminent which will further raise the profile of this condition.

References:

1. Long Term Conditions Alliance web site
2. Asthma UK web site
3. British Lung Foundation web site
4. House of Commons web site
5. Upton J, Madoc-Sutton H, Sheikh A, Frank TL, Walker S, Fletcher M. National Survey of the Roles and Training of primary Care respiratory Nurses in the UK in 2006: are we making progress? Primary Care Respiratory Journal in press.