
The Royal College of Nursing's information needs survey of nurses and health professionals

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Authors

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Background

In 2004 RCN Library and Information Services carried out a UK-wide survey into the information needs of nurses, midwives, health visitors and health care assistants. We wanted to find out the current information needs of all the nursing community, not only RCN members, so that we would have a good evidence base from which to develop our services and play an influencing role to improve nurses' access to information.

Methodology

A literature review of similar projects was undertaken. A questionnaire was then developed using the expertise of a variety of RCN colleagues from across the UK including researchers, health librarians and an independent statistician. It was decided to use a hard copy questionnaire to ensure that the whole target audience was reached, not just those health care professionals with good access to information technology and the skills and confidence to use it.

The survey was carried out between 1st June 2004 and 16th July 2004. With the help of RCN staff across the UK, a combination of RCN activists and health librarians was recruited, on a voluntary basis, to act as "local champions". They were used to distribute the questionnaire to registered nurses, midwives, health visitors and health care assistants – not just RCN members. This method of distribution was selected because the questionnaire was a long one, taking an average of 30 minutes to complete, and it was felt that without the intervention of a local champion, many people might fail to complete and return the survey. 129 local champions were recruited.

The survey focussed on:-

- Information or knowledge to improve practice in the clinical area
- Information needed to support lifelong learning and formal study.

The survey contained 42 questions, although since many of these contained several statements requiring a response, in total we had

nearly 300 variables to code for each questionnaire. In addition to general information about the respondents, their post and their training, the questionnaire also asked about types of information source used for particular types of problems or question as well as specific sources used; their ease of access to various information sources including computers and the internet, and their local health library if they had one; and their workplace culture and environment. A full copy of the questionnaire may be obtained by emailing the authors.

In total 1715 questionnaires were completed and returned, making the exercise one of the largest ever undertaken. The forms were coded and entered into an SPSS database. They were then analysed with the help of an independent statistician. The survey reached a good cross-section of the target audience, making comparisons across regions, countries and work sector possible. 80% of our respondents were registered nurses, 6% Health Care Assistants, 2% health visitors, 3% midwives, 6% students and 3.5% other (a mix of management and academic). 77% of respondents were members of the RCN, 23% were not.

Conclusions

Nursing staff with the best access to information are more likely to change their practice, and respondents who change practice as a result of evidence have better access to Internet, the library, more support at work and better information skills

The employer's role is crucial in fostering a positive attitude towards evidence-based practice. Those who are encouraged to search for evidence for practice at work are more likely to search in their own free time and to study more hours at work and in their own time.

Significant numbers of nursing staff have no or limited access to computers with 15% having no access to a computer at work, 19% never using the Internet in relation to work, and 17% never getting access to the Internet at work when needed.

Nursing staff in the independent sector have less access to information, with 50% from independent care homes having no access to a computer at work, 56% never using the Internet in relation to work, and 56% never getting access to the Internet at work when needed.

There are local and regional differences in accessing information and the internet.

Busy nurses need up to date, good quality, relevant evidence for their clinical areas in manageable amounts. In addition to the need to have information pushed at them nursing staff are also interested in pulling in their own information, and identified the following training needs:-

- 30% reported needing basic computer skills
- 44% reported needing basic information skills training
- 74% reported needing advanced information searching skills.

Nurses still require physical resources and support from people as well as online information, so there is a need for a blended solution.

We are using the data from the survey to shape our information strategy for the next three years and will be testing some of our proposed solutions with focus groups of members over the coming months. We have already held a joint seminar with NLH to look at the particular needs of staff in independent care homes and work on this area is continuing. Next year the RCN as a whole will be launching a campaign on nurses' access to IT.

One very exciting result of the survey is a joint project which RCN Library & Information Services is undertaking with NHS England to produce a Nursing Knowledge Toolbox a one stop shop for nursing staff including applied nursing resources, evidence based digests, quality improvement tools, tools for assessment and monitoring, learning opportunities and a community of practice for nursing staff.

Both full and summary reports of the survey are available on our website at: -
<http://www.rcn.org.uk/news/display.php?ID=1494>.

The summary report has also been published as a RCN publication and is available at: -
<http://www.rcn.org.uk/publications/pdf/TheInformationNeedsOfNurses.pdf>