**What a great opportunity……the District Nurse**

**Specialist Practice Apprenticeship Trailblazer!**

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 ‘District Nurse’ is a title currently bestowed upon those who have completed a Specialist Practitioner Qualification (SPQ) and lead a team of community nurses. District nurses have coordinated and delivered care for patients in their own home for over 150 years. Throughout this period, their role has changed considerably. Despite an increasing need for the role of the District Nurse, numbers of qualified District Nurses are falling, and are expected to continue to fall (Green et al 2017). The reasons for this are multi-faceted, and are due, in part, to an ageing workforce and a reduction in Specialist Practice training. These factors are putting the future of the District Nurse in jeopardy. Many major organisation - the Queen’s Nurse Institute, Royal College of Nursing, the Association of District Nurse Educators - and a range of Community Providers and Higher Education Institutes (HEI) have called for urgent action to avoid losing the cornerstone of the delivery of ‘care closer to home’ (NHS, 2014).

The SPQ programme is delivered by a number of HEIs, at degree or postgraduate level, over one-year full time or 2-years part time, and is transformational for the practitioner, equipping them to manage diverse, complex and busy teams. Due to changes in Learning Beyond Registration (LBR) funding for training across England, this programme is likely to cease in its current form by 2019. A devastating prospect to the delivery of quality care in the community.

However, we heard last month, following a campaign spearheaded by Stephanie Lawrence, that the Institute for Apprenticeships has finally agreed to the formation of a Trailblazer Group to develop a District Nursing Specialist Practitioner Apprenticeship Standard. This opportunity not only represents a potential solution to the availability of SPQ training places, but it presents an opportunity for a new method of funding the programme from an employer’s Apprenticeship Levy. The development of the Apprenticeship Standard will take place over the next few months and will require approval by Skills for Health, before being made available for HEIs to develop their programmes and have them approved to be delivered. This Trailblazer group, which is Trust-led, will work on the programme requirements. This is such a positive for the future delivery of care for patients in the community. The application of an apprenticeship model to the programme may well offer many benefits, including keeping students in the workforce for some of their time whilst training and delivery of the programme over an extended period which may facilitate the inclusion of independent supplementary prescribing alongside advanced health assessment skills in addition to the leadership, research and long-term conditions management many HEIs include in their current programmes. Some HEIs have innovatively included this range of modules within their one-year programmes but this is challenging for all but the most dedicated students. Apprenticeship delivery will allow for progression across a two-year period, enabling all SPQ students to become a practitioner fully able to close the most complex of community consultations. What a great opportunity!

References:

Green J, Bliss J, Lawrence S (2017) What’s in a name? Is district nursing in danger of extinction? British Journal of Community Nursing 22 (11) 547-549

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