

EDITORIAL

Health care as meaningful work and investing in the current and future workforce

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I am delighted to have been invited to write an Editorial for this issue of the journal. As a Registered Nurse in the United Kingdom (UK) and currently working in a Senior Academic role within the School of Medicine at Cardiff University it was a pleasure to read the breadth of research being undertaken across a range of countries. My overall observations from the articles are that the importance of health professionals and their role in providing care which is underpinned by an adequately provisioned healthcare system. These factors are not just an issue for Central Europe as I can see similarities with the situation in the UK and the challenges faced by health professionals in all settings.

In the study by Galasová et al. (2023) the authors highlighted that respondents felt their work was meaningful but that they were working in a dysfunctional system. This implies that health professionals are dedicated to their work despite the challenging conditions they are working in. This situation is reflected in the UK where over several years deficiencies in the UK health system has been highlighted yet conditions for health workers has not improved. As a consequence, we have seen a number of different health professional groups taking industrial action i.e., striking as a means to highlight to the Government that they are calling for better pay and better working conditions. I am not suggesting this is an approach that all countries should be adopting, in fact what is needed is investment in health professionals to sustain health systems.

Investment does not always have to be viewed in a purely monetary way, it can take other forms such as re-examining approaches to how health professionals are managed as part of the health care system i.e., how well do managers know their staff and how good are they at supporting them in their

work. In the article by Haikonen et al. (2023) the authors draw attention to the concept of appreciative management which embodies several values such as developing a culture of treating people with respect, honouring individuals, maintaining fairness, promoting well-being, appreciating everyone, and building collegial working relationships. Haikonen and colleagues highlighted the importance of this approach moving forwards as Estonia has fewer health care workers than other Central European countries on average which means there are gaps in the workforce needed and the numbers being trained. The additional challenges of attracting individuals into the health care profession relate to the perceived low attractiveness of the nature of the work, low salary, lack of opportunities for promotion and excessive workload. The key message from this study is that it is important for health care workers to know that managers value their work as this can help to promote a sense of well-being. In time this could help to change the negative perceptions of working in a health care system and help to encourage individuals to consider it as a worthy career choice.

In promoting health care as a career, we do need to consider the important role of education and the curricula underpinning the acquisition of knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Often there is a focus on competencies i.e., what does someone know or what can they do, but about the more difficult attributes related to behaviour and attitudes? The article examining the cross-cultural adaptation of the caring-ability index brings to light several qualities which we might associate with the notion of caring, for example, knowledge and patience, but how many would consider courage being related to caring? In my own field of health care – wound healing – I have seen the term “courage” used in relation to making decisions about when

(and when not to) use compression therapy for individuals with lower limb ulceration (Atkin et al., 2021). The language used for this consensus document includes “visual transformation”, “no longer accepting the status quo” and “solving challenges”. As an Educator of both undergraduate and postgraduate health care students it has made me reflect on what I could be doing to support the notion of courage as an integral aspect of a health care professionals caring ability.

Machul et al. (2023) explore acmeology-based development of nurses’ professional skills in the context of lifelong learning. The authors argue that such an approach is needed to promote development of skills, refine professional competencies and to ensure adequate patient care. Acmeology can support continuous professional development but does require exploration of the importance of achievements in facilitating lifelong learning, also examining what motivates individuals to undertake professional activities. Machul and colleagues present a good case for embedding this approach in postgraduate education for nurses. As Educators of health professionals, I think we could be doing more to integrate the guiding principles of acmeology, for example, the importance of self-improvement and self-development, working on weaknesses, level of knowledge and skills and communicating in professional situations. Relating this back to my own area of wound care practice there are positive moves to facilitate lifelong learning embodied in the National Wound Care Core Capabilities Framework for England (National Wound Care Strategy Programme, 2023). Importantly this document considers the knowledge, skills and behaviours required to improve wound care, albeit in relation to specific types of wounds (pressure ulcers, leg ulcers and surgical wounds). Importantly the framework sets out capabilities for all levels of health professionals working with individuals with wounds.

I think there are several important messages across the articles in this issue including raising the profile

of health care as a rewarding career but in order to realise this there needs to be investment in the existing workforce to support their well-being. There also needs to be a commitment to supportive health care management to facilitate retention of staff which could be achieved in a few ways not least of which is getting to know them better and valuing their contributions. Finally, I think all of the articles speak to the notion of *courage*, which may be innate in all of us working in health care, but needs to be nurtured through both our undergraduate and postgraduate journey.

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