



Ian Govier describes how the RCN clinical leadership programme is evolving in and outside the UK, and continuing to advance excellence in leadership development and patient care

Advancing excellence in leadership

FROM ABERYSTWYTH to Adelaide, Birmingham to Brussels, the RCN's highly successful clinical leadership programme continues to benefit health care organisation and delivery. Bolstered by a new team structure and a shared vision of 'advancing excellence in clinical leadership', this internationally acclaimed programme has several initiatives for healthcare staff working in both the public and independent sectors to access.

The RCN clinical leadership team provides patient focused, needs led and evidence based programmes that are dynamic, inclusive and responsive and which aim to develop the leadership capabilities of health and social care practitioners and their teams. This is achieved in the context of day-to-day clinical practice, the organisational culture and the current policy agenda.

The original programme was based on the findings of an RCN ward leadership project, an action research study exploring the leadership skills required to promote better practice (Cunningham and Kitson 1997). Now, more than 170 NHS trusts and 2,000 nurses and other healthcare professionals across England, Wales and Scotland have participated in the programme, which is also firmly established in Australia, Belgium and Switzerland with other countries expressing interest in participating.

Beliefs and values

The programmes delivered by the clinical leadership team incorporate the principles of transformational leadership and lifelong learning. They are founded on research evidence, as well as a value system that embraces the following beliefs:

- Effective leaders provide high quality patient and client care.
- All health and social care practitioners require leadership skills.
- Individuals can develop their leadership capabilities.
- Potential is best developed in cultures of high support and high challenge.
- Participants bring rich and varied experience to the programmes, and such diversity is best valued and mobilised through person centred, experiential approaches to learning.
- Change is exciting and stimulating but can be difficult and painful.
- Effective leaders can influence local and national policy agendas, and respond creatively in complex environments of rapid and frequent change.
- For leadership initiatives to be effective they need to be supported at all organisational levels.

England

Over the next two years, 25,000 front line nurses and allied health professionals in England will take part in the NHS leadership centre's 'leadership at the point of care' programme, which aims to build on other national initiatives such as the RCN clinical leadership programme and Leading Empowering Organisations (LEO).

By employing work based learning strategies participants will be able to improve their effectiveness by applying directly learned skills to clinical practice. They will also be able to renew their passion for clinical work through techniques such as reflection, discussion, guidance, application and celebration.

Meanwhile, an RCN programme intended to develop the leadership abilities of modern matrons is running at Hinchingsbrooke Health Care NHS Trust. This nine-month programme uses a combination of action learning and use of patient-centred workshops to explore and identify approaches to improving patient care.

For those with a leaning for learning through information technology, the UK Higher Education Partnership (HEP) is an innovative project that allows individuals to access leadership resources on the internet. It is a joint venture between City University in London, the Universities of Leicester and Ulster, and the RCN. The online leadership module aims to provide a flexible learning experience so that students can plan studies around personal and professional commitments.

Another exciting initiative is the NHS leadership centre's clinical teams project, which will build on the success of the existing RCN clinical leadership programme. The RCN clinical leadership team has been commissioned to design and deliver this programme to reach 100 groups across health and social care sectors to help develop leadership and so underpin the NHS modernisation agenda.

Using proven techniques, such as action learning, patient stories, observations of care and 360° feedback, clinical teams will be supported so that they can identify how to enhance effective patient care, and devise, implement and evaluate strategies to achieve that enhancement.

Scotland

The Scottish Executive has also recognised the benefits of the RCN programme and has provided approximately £300,000 to allow the RCN Scottish leadership team to reach two out of three NHS organisations in Scotland. Rural and remote programmes for communities on the Orkney and Shetland Islands have received

good evaluations, and the team has two new staff members to meet the increasing workload.

Delivering the RCN clinical leadership programme across more than 70 per cent of Scotland's NHS board areas has also demonstrated that many healthcare professionals in clinical leadership positions receive too little development aid to become effective clinical leaders. Working in partnership with organisations throughout Scotland, the leadership team has developed the 'inspired to lead' programme to bridge this gap.

This three-month programme aims to raise awareness of how effective leadership contributes to high quality patient care and provides participants with practical tools to increase their everyday effectiveness. The first wave of the programme has been successfully evaluated with all participants stating that they would recommend the programme to colleagues. Further cohorts are planned for spring 2004.

Wales

By the beginning of 2004, 13 of the 14 NHS trusts in Wales had started participating in the RCN clinical leadership programme. This equates to more than 150 clinical leaders engaging in personal and professional development practices that directly improve the quality of patient care.

Interventions such as patient stories, which specifically engage patients to share their experiences of health care, have been reported back to trust executive boards and local programme steering groups and have both highlighted areas for improvement in health care and celebrated good clinical practice.

Clinical leaders in Wales are discovering that the leadership

programme allows them to step back from their busy and demanding day-to-day working environment, reflect on care and services, and implement workable strategies to enhance patient care.

As the programme continues to gather momentum, words and letters of support are being received from NHS staff at all levels. Director of service strategy and modernisation at Swansea NHS Trust Andrew Bellamy, for example, recently wrote to RCN Wales stating: 'The programme is contributing towards the development of "change agents" in the trust, who can help drive forward the modernisation agenda. We have been impressed by the calibre of nurses on the programme and the way it has been organised. On behalf of the trust, I wish to say how much we value the clinical leadership programme.'

Meanwhile, as director of RCN Wales, Liz Hewett stated at a leadership seminar in Cardiff last June: 'RCN Wales continues to lobby the Welsh Assembly Government and other key stakeholders to assist independent sector nurses in Wales to access RCN leadership programmes.'

Outside the UK

Last February, clinical leadership programme director Geraldine Cunningham headed for south Australia to spend a month at the Royal Adelaide Hospital. Working closely with Susan Mann, its leadership programme facilitator, she helped set up a two-year government-funded pilot of the clinical leadership programme. Ten representatives from six healthcare organisations in South Australia are helping to establish the programme, which has recruited clinical leaders from the Royal Adelaide Hospital as well as nearby states and territories.

In Europe, the Belgian government is funding 11 hospitals this year to undertake the clinical

leadership programme, and in Switzerland discussions continue with health organisations to build on the clinical leadership programme that started in 1999.

The Future

The RCN clinical leadership team recognises that much health care is organised and delivered outside the NHS. Consequently, work is underway to create programmes to meet the leadership development needs of staff working in the independent sector. This will augment bespoke leadership programmes that have been established successfully in independent sector organisations, such as Hollister Health Care, an organisation specialising in colostomy and continence care, which in 2002 sponsored eight stoma care specialist nurses to undertake the RCN clinical leadership programme.

These leadership programmes are evolving in response to research, evaluation and national policies. The RCN clinical leadership research team, for example, has recently evaluated the third phase of the programme, which involved nearly 100 healthcare organisations in England.

This research, due to be published this spring by the RCN, demonstrates the impact of effective clinical leadership on the experience of patient care and the benefits of involving patients in the health care decision making process. It also shows the importance of linking trust strategies to the leadership programme and the effectiveness of the programme in developing clinical leadership in diverse healthcare settings.

South Essex Partnership NHS Trust has been running the clinical leadership programme since 2001. A former director of nursing for the trust said: 'We would like to put on record our appreciation of the quality and the impact that the RCN clinical leadership programme has had in this organisation.'

'In particular,' he went on, 'the patient stories and observations of care have caught the imagination of the trust board and executive team. This is important because we have been able to demonstrate what has changed. The RCN programme has enabled us to measure changes that have taken place to improve the quality of the service we provide.' 

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Reference

Cunningham G, Kitson A (1997) *Ward Leadership Project: A journey to patient-centred leadership*. Executive Summary. London, RCN.