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The nursing crisis and its risk to essential care

The Francis report (2013) highlighted significant failures in leadership and management at the Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust. This well-known report, commissioned by the government in 2010, analysed the causes behind the many catastrophic failings in care at the trust between 2005–2009. It was both lengthy and damning in equal measures, with serious issues at every level—particularly putting the spotlight on the nursing profession. Francis (2013) documented the Trust’s failings in ‘basic nursing care’, which included patients being left without adequate nutrition and hydration, among other care needs. Nurses were cited as being uncaring, harassed and, in many cases, working in understaffed areas. This exacerbated an already negative work culture, which adversely affected the care patients received. The report made it clear that inadequate staffing levels in clinical areas resulted in patients’ needs being unmet. Since then, the NHS has responded to many of the report’s recommendations, with a particular focus on increasing the recruitment of nurses and other caregivers in clinical areas. However, the long-term sustainability of this work has come at a time when many trusts have been required to make significant ‘efficiency savings’, which has resulted in the financial crisis seen today. Running in parallel to this has been the recent changes in funding for nurse training in England. The NHS will no longer fund the training of future nurses, which has resulted in an astounding 23% reduction in applications across England this year (Universities and Colleges Admissions Service, 2017). Many trusts have found themselves struggling with the recruitment and retention of registered nursing staff. The NHS Staff Survey Co-ordination Centre (2017) noted that 49% of registered nurses felt they did not have adequate staffing levels to do their job properly. This shortage has put increased pressure on nurses to try to balance and meet all of the care needs of their patients (The Health Foundation, 2017). Unfortunately, at times of limited resources, essential nursing care such as nutrition and hydration are often the most neglected areas, resulting in almost 300 deaths in England and Wales in 2014–2015 alone (Office for National Statistics, 2016). We must invest in the recruitment, training, and retention of nursing staff so that the catastrophic failures of Mid Staffordshire are not repeated, and so patients receive not only the most complex of care but continue to receive the essential support they need with their daily activities of living.