

Looking Good? The attractiveness of the NHS as an employer

Crispin Coombs

Research Associate
Business School
Loughborough University

Anyone interested in the image of the NHS as an employer or the current problems in recruitment and retention should take a look at the 'Looking Good?' research project being carried out by a team of researchers in the Business School at Loughborough University. The two year project, funded by the Department of Health aims to investigate the way that the NHS is perceived as an employer by potential staff and concentrates specifically on the nursing, physiotherapy and radiography professions, all of which have experienced difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff.

The first qualitative stage of the project has been completed and the second quantitative stage is scheduled for completion in September 2002. The research has involved interviews with potential recruits to ascertain their attitudes and perceptions of the NHS as an employer. Interviews were conducted with participants from six sample groups: school pupils; mature students; students undertaking professional training; NHS staff not qualified as nurses or AHPs; qualified staff working for agencies; and qualified staff working for the independent sector. The second stage of the study involves a more extensive postal survey.

Preliminary findings found that the most frequent image of the NHS is concerned with operational difficulties (e.g. staff shortages) rather than its purpose of helping and curing people. Nursing is perceived as hard work and long hours whilst the role of the physiotherapist is primarily associated with sport by those people

unfamiliar with the profession. Those people familiar with physiotherapy felt that the profession was insufficiently recognised by the public and other healthcare professions. This lack of recognition was also highlighted for radiography, although radiography was also viewed more in terms of hard work than physiotherapy.

Most respondents indicated that their views of the NHS came from the media, personal experience or the experience of family members or friends. Even those respondents with experience of working in the NHS said that the media still influenced their views.

The general view from participants was that the NHS needed to publicise itself better as an employer by avoiding too much focus on nurses and doctors and to steer a middle course between the extremes of over-glamorising the profession and appearing too desperate for anyone it could get.

The positive areas of working for the NHS related to: working with patients; job security and availability; good pensions; variety in work; team working; and learning opportunities. However, the major negative areas related to staff shortages, poor pay and long or inconvenient hours. Other common themes related to a lack of time or resources, bureaucracy and poor management, negative attitudes from patients and lack of career progression.

The most common solution identified by participants to make the NHS more attractive as an employer was increases in the level of pay, whilst the main barrier of working for the NHS was considered to be the financial cost of obtaining the necessary training.

Full details about the project and its publications can be found at:
<http://www.lboro.ac.uk/departments/bs/lookinggood/LookingGood.html>