

**Title: Engaging the nursing workforce to achieve a culture of excellence: Nottingham  
Children's Hospital ANCC Pathway to Excellence® Journey**

**Abstract:** High quality nursing care is linked to improved patient experience and outcomes, which is of paramount importance to healthcare delivery, especially in light of the significant local and global challenges. Having workplace environments that nurture a culture of nursing excellence is fundamental to delivering best quality nursing care. The American Nursing Credentialing Centre (ANCC) Pathway to Excellence® programme provides a framework to improve working environments for nurses. This paper narrates the Pathway to Excellence® journey for the first Children's Hospital to attain this international accreditation in Europe with a focus on staff engagement. Key to success was nursing strategic planning, transformational leadership, and effective staff engagement activities informed by a change model framework.

Keywords: environment; education; nursing excellence; staff engagement; leadership; change management

## **Introduction**

Twenty-twenty was Florence Nightingale's bicentennial year and has been designated as the first ever global Year of Nurses and Midwives (World Health Organisation, 2020). As one of the largest healthcare workforce groups, nurses are highly skilled professionals with expertise in various clinical specialities (National Health Service England (NHS) 2020). The current COVID-19 global pandemic has brought innumerable challenges and pressure upon healthcare workforce (West et al., 2020). However nurses, among other healthcare professionals, have demonstrated resilience and fortitude in delivering care to their patients during the crisis.

A culture of nursing excellence is a pre-requisite for attainment by healthcare organisations aiming to deliver world class nursing care. It is important that health care organisations have a culture of nursing excellence to achieve: (i) excellent patient outcomes; (ii) sustainable recruitment and retention of staff; (iii) positive impact on local community; and (iv) a reputation for the delivery of first class nursing care locally, nationally and internationally (American Nursing Credentialing Centre (ANCC), 2019a). However to achieve, demonstrate and deliver nursing excellence, strategic planning, transformational leadership, and effective change management is required in setting the vision for change, inspiring and equipping staff with necessary resources to ensure success (Arthurs et al., 2017). The Nottingham Children's Hospital (NCH), which comprises of neonatal-, children and young people-, and integrated sexual health-services, has taken a leap to celebrate and demonstrate its culture of nursing excellence by going on the ANCC Pathway to Excellence® Journey to gain accreditation.

This paper will discuss the change management approach and activities adopted to engage the workforce to achieve nursing excellence and recognition as the first children's hospital in Europe to gain ANCC Pathway to Excellence® designation.

## **Context**

Nottingham Children's Hospital is part of the Nottingham University Hospital (NUH) NHS Trust, which is the fourth largest acute trust in England providing healthcare to more than 2.5million residents of Nottinghamshire and an additional 4 million from surrounding counties (Care Quality Commission, 2019). NCH provides care to children from birth until 19 years of age. The hospital has 116 beds and cares for an average of 40,000 children per year (Care Quality Commission, 2019). It is a well-known tertiary centre for renal, major trauma, neurosurgery and oncology specialities. Its other specialities include burns and plastics, cleft lip and palate and general medical and surgical treatments. The sexual health services provide care to 28,000 patients every year from Nottinghamshire and beyond with 540 registered nurses caring for patients across all services.

## **Defining ANCC Pathway to Excellence® Program**

The Pathway to Excellence® Program was launched in 2009 (Jarrin et al., 2017) by the ANCC. It is an international accreditation for healthcare organisations that provide nurses with positive and safe practice environments (ANCC, 2011), and is the only international nursing excellence accreditation available for health care organisations. The program framework offers a valuable platform for transforming cultures in any environment where nurses work regardless of the location, size (Pabico and Cadmus, 2016) and healthcare delivery system. The initial programme had 12 standards (Appendix 1 Box 1) which has now been reduced to 6 standards (Appendix 1 Table 1) which organisations must meet to demonstrate provision of safe working environment where nursing staff have inclusive professional development to excel in their practice. Individual pathway standards consist of specific criteria that indicate the presence of good organisational working environment for nurses (ANCC 2019a).

Accreditation for ANCC Pathway to Excellence® program is a two stage process, firstly alignment with and enculturation of ANCC Pathway to Excellence® standards and secondly

application for recognition (evidence submission and survey). Evidence submission provides a proof that the organisation has systems in place enabling sustainable demonstration of living the standards set out by the ANCC. Two to three months following evidence submission, registered nursing staff are requested to complete a 28-question survey based on the six standards, with the survey assessing if a positive practice environment is embedded within the organisation for both staff and patients.

Completing the staff survey is voluntary. The minimum required criteria to achieve accreditation is that 60% of the organisation's registered nursing staff complete the survey and 21 out of 28 questions have to have a 75% response of either agree or strongly agree. The survey is anonymous and strictly confidential. In case where the organisation fails the evidence submission stage, they will not progress to the survey stage. Moreover if the applicant organisation passes the evidence submission stage and fail the survey, the application will be unsuccessful, and the organisation will have to reapply.

### **International and UK picture**

Globally there are 191 hospitals with ANCC Pathway to Excellence® accreditation (ANCC, 2020). However, within the United Kingdom (UK) only one organisation, Northampton General Hospital NHS Trust (NGH), had been previously accredited in 2018. Various arguments have been raised requiring clear justification and demonstration of the appropriateness of the accreditation in the UK setting. Currently across the UK, there are approximately 50 000 nursing vacancies, and globally there is consistency in high turnover rates within the nursing profession, ranging from 12% - 36% (Helm and Bungeroth, 2017, Marufu et al., 2021). Due to this current nursing shortage challenge healthcare organisations are looking at systems and processes which can promote the recruitment and retention of staff. The principles of Pathway to Excellence® accreditation have demonstrated that they are transferrable to any healthcare organisation as a mechanism for talent management (Pabico and Cadmus, 2016).

It's widely recognised that continual focus on patient satisfaction by delivering high quality care is essential, but emphasis must also be placed on the management of human resources through modification of culture and working environment as a strategy to attract and retain staff (Marufu et al., 2021). When nurses leave the profession, the cost negatively affects both patients and organisations, resulting in huge financial pressure on organisations to support these vacancies. Within the UK, the NHS spends £43 million on staff recruitment every year and £3.3billion on agency staff (Department of Health (DoH), 2016). This financial resource could be better directed to other areas of healthcare to protect and care for patients. Organisations which are Pathway to Excellence® designated have seen a steady increase in nurse retention (Dans et al., 2017), and at Northampton General Hospital their nursing vacancy rate has been reduced from 18% to 11% (ANCC, 2019e).

Across the UK there has been momentum to transform nursing practice by prioritising implementation of key national workforce strategies such as the NHS People Plan (DoH, 2019), which focuses on fostering a culture of health and wellbeing support and inclusivity to deliver patient care. The recent courage and compassion report on supporting nurses and midwives to deliver high quality care outlined the need for nurses to have control over their work life, being connected and cared for by and caring of colleagues, and the need to experience effectiveness in work and deliver valued outcomes (West et al., 2020) as core in creating a culture of nursing excellence. In a recent review on factors influencing retention among hospital nurses (Marufu et al., 2021), we have outlined how in current clinical practice our organisation is applying the shared-decision making and leadership domains of the Pathway to Excellence® program in promoting contribution of frontline nurses in influencing the practice environment and ultimately enhancing patient outcomes (Arthurs et al, 2017). This staff empowerment and autonomy strategy is achieved through shared governance councils at ward, divisional and various staff group levels, demonstrating practical transformational leadership. The Trust has also committed greater resources to extending

nursing career progression and staff wellbeing projects, thus equipping staff to ensure successful desired outcomes.

Previous policy documents and drivers (Royal College of Nursing (RCN) 2015, Health Education England (HEE) 2015, Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) 2017) have acknowledged the requirement of a highly motivated and skilled nursing workforce and a need of further investment required in education and professional development to meet these expectations. Across the UK, the safe staffing agenda has also been a high priority to ensure availability of enough nursing staff with the right skills and knowledge, in the right place at the right time (RCN 2020). The report on safe staffing acknowledged the need of a safe working environment for the nursing staff to ensure patient safety and better quality of care. It is worth noting that the prime aim of implementing the principles of Pathway to Excellence® is ultimately patient safety as patient outcomes are then owned and are the responsibility of every single nurse and employee of any healthcare organisation. Globally nurses working in Pathway to Excellence® designated hospitals stated that they feel valued and they work in an environment which supports quality nursing. This in turn generates team work and a sense of pride as the spotlight is subsequently put on nursing bringing the profession to the forefront allowing nurses to live in the moment and enjoy the experience whilst working in a safe environment (ANCC, 2017).

### **Beginning of Pathway to Excellence® Program journey**

The Nottingham University Hospitals have an overarching nursing and midwifery strategy that has been aligned to achieving care excellence for nearly a decade. This ensured that key foundations for excellence were already in place such as a comprehensive shared governance infrastructure and innovations in education and clinical academic development across the whole organisation.

Nine months prior to Pathway to Excellence® journey, an NCH wide consultation was undertaken to understand nursing staff views and priorities to enable supportive working

environment to ensure better patient outcomes. The consultation process included several workshops, focus group meetings and individual nurses' feedback to ascertain their views. From this consultation it was evident that nurses wanted to be recognised both nationally and internationally for their excellent nursing care. Results from the consultation were used to develop the NCH professional nursing strategic plan with the Pathway to Excellence® accreditation as one of the key deliverables. Thus applying for Pathway to Excellence® was an indication to peers and other organisations of NCH's commitment to delivery of high standard quality care and enabling nurses to excel in all aspects of nursing (HEE, 2015).

The ANCC Pathway to Excellence® journey for NCH was started in September 2019, with a formal launch on November 26 2019. The launch event was hosted by the Chief Nursing Officer (CNO) and NCH nursing leadership teams at all levels and showcased the purpose and benefits of ANCC Pathway to Excellence®. The launch also served to demonstrate the visibility, availability and willingness of the nursing leadership team to listen to staff and to ensure success of the program.

### **Implementation stage**

To ensure success of the pathway journey, an ANCC Pathway to Excellence® steering group was established and chaired by the NCH divisional lead nurse. The team included; a project director, project lead, clinical-academic nurses, digital and communication personnel, and representatives from frontline and managerial nursing roles, and shared governance councils.

From project inception, the team used a bottom-up approach, with great focus on frontline nursing staff to ensure ownership of changes. Staff engagement was essential and the Pathway Team employed various methods (Table 1).

The project used the Prosci ADKAR® Model for change (Hiatt 2006) as it has been previously used in organisations undergoing similar forms of change (Arthurs et al., 2017). The model is goal oriented acting as a guide to effect organisational work environment



change. The model consists of five tangible outcomes that need to be achieved for lasting change; awareness (of the need to change), desire (to participate and support the change), knowledge (on how to change), ability (to implement required skills and behaviours) and reinforcement (to sustain the change) (Hiatt 2006).

The ADKAR model of change focuses greatly on employees and their needs rather than just the technical aspects demonstrating its suitability and success for changes required. Staff inclusivity from the beginning of the journey was fundamental as their participation was valuable in ascertaining the rate at which changes can reliably be deployed. By outlining set goals to be met without a specific method, the model provided a flexible framework which was easy to apply allowing deployment of incremental changes since the journey to gain the accreditation required to be done in stages.

Table 1 shows a mapping of pathway journey activities to respective model of change domains.

To implement required activities for both stages a gap analysis was conducted to identify areas where further work was required to target all the areas covered by the change model and this was included in shaping the operational plan.

### **Evidence collection and write up stage**

We started collecting required evidence for individual ANCC Pathway to Excellence® domains in November 2019, with a target of providing written evidence of all 64 competencies subdivided under the 6 domains ready for submission by the 31<sup>st</sup> of January 2020. *Appendix 1 table 1* shows examples of collected evidence, which was a primary responsibility of the project lead.

We were successful at this stage with only four out of sixty-four competencies requiring further evidence support. Success at this stage was facilitated by the following factors; strong transformational leadership, effective staff engagement and networking, willingness of

staff to support the journey and readily available evidence. These factors are associated with the awareness, desire and knowledge stages of the ADKAR change model. The Pathway operations team printed various promotional materials and went around the organisation, having meetings at all levels and engaging staff through various media channels (social media, emails, screen savers) outlining the purpose and benefits of the journey. In demonstration of their desire to participate and support the change staff completed their care excellence passports and provided evidence where required.

### **Staff Survey stage**

The ANCC Pathway to Excellence® staff survey was scheduled to start from the 8<sup>th</sup> of July 2020. Prior to the survey commencing, specific activities were done in accordance with the knowledge, ability and reinforcement domains of the ADKAR model of change framework. To ensure knowledge of the terminology, a glossary of American English medical terms which were aligned to British medical terms was made available for the staff to avoid confusion. This was an essential part of the communication strategy. No major challenges were encountered, as initially anticipated. This could be attributed to the following strategic facilitators (Mathieson et al., 2018); a) our organisation is a diverse multicultural working environment with staff from various backgrounds working together to meet organisational goals, b) staff received enough evidence on the effectiveness and benefits of the programme and they were aware of readily available evidence to meet the accreditation requirements, and c) there was ownership and flexibility throughout the accreditation process which afforded staff autonomy. Overall, staff were aware that implementation of the Pathway to Excellence® program will afford a positive impact upon their working environment and patient safety

To ensure ability, staff survey readiness assessment was performed through feedback and pulse surveys. The activity enabled us to identify strengths and further areas for development and more importantly how ready the organisation was for the final assessment.

State of readiness assessment also included ensuring that staff have enough time and equipment to complete the survey. In order to sustain the change the organisation continued weekly ANCC Pathway to Excellence® organisational briefings and the drive to fulfil the nursing professional strategic plan. Other activities for staff engagement included a carnival week with various activities including; games face painting, feathers, and survey station competitions.

The survey was launched by the CNO. During the survey, a dedicated team was available to relieve frontline staff to allow them time to complete the survey and answer any questions about the survey. Only eligible staff completed the survey as per ANCC guidelines (ANCC 2020). The survey was open for 21 days, after which the organisation received feedback that 94.8% of eligible staff have completed the surveys. In August 2020 the ANCC announced that our organisation had achieved 75% agree or strongly agree on all 28 questions which was an excellent result. The result demonstrated the essence of clear practical staff engagement to bring transformation within a nursing environment – an excitement shared by all staff across our organisation.

## **Challenges**

The Nottingham Childrens Hospital completed the accreditation survey stage in the midst of a global pandemic. COVID-19 was deemed a global pandemic and within the UK, the NHS awakened to an emergency it had never seen in more than half a century. Routine work within the NHS was cancelled and all disciplines prepared for the pandemic by freeing up inpatient and critical care capacity (NHS England, 2020b).

Pathway to Excellence® accreditation is a new recognition for the UK healthcare system and there may be some sceptics due to it being an American accreditation profoundly shaped by private market-oriented healthcare system (RCN 2015). However, UK national policy documents; such as the NHS People Plan (DoH 2019), Kings Fund courage of compassion report (West et al., 2020), RCN Safer Staffing (RCN 2020), recognise principles outlined by

the Pathway to Excellence® program for future quality nursing care delivery. The Pathway to Excellence® program is currently being undertaken in other hospitals in England in recognition that a structured approach to creating a positive practice environment structurally empowers registered nurses to deliver excellence in care. Nationally organisations are recognising that the fundamental aspects of the Pathway to Excellence® accreditation are essential mechanism to staff recruitment and retention as staff would likely be more attracted to organisations where they are empowered and able to help change practice for staff wellbeing and patient outcomes (Wilson et al, 2015).

### **Benefits to patient outcomes**

Pathway to Excellence® standards are core not only as a basis for a positive practice environment framework to support staff, but also to enhance delivery of the best quality of care for better patient outcomes (Pauley and Fox, 2018, Jarrin et al., 2017). Organisational support of the nursing workforce is associated with increased personalised patient care (Jourdain and Chenervert, 2010). Nurses across NCH are empowered and autonomous within the work place as demonstrated by the results of our Pathway to Excellence® survey. This is linked to patient positive outcomes as it is well documented that when nurses feel empowered and engaged within the work place there is increased quality of patient care and patients are happier (NHS Employers 2014).

Continual improvement in patient care outcomes requires both internal and external benchmarking across healthcare institutions and the outlined standards can be used in national quality matrices to reduce adverse patient outcomes. Evidence submitted to the ANCC for this accreditation demonstrates the organisation's current robust measures in place to ensure patient safety. As part of monitoring quality of care NCH collects data on key performance indicators on patient outcomes enabling evaluation of Pathway standards. This can be achieved further through identification of areas where nurses require knowledge and or skill development (Pauley and Fox, 2018). A recent review on burn out in nursing

(Dall'Ora et al, 2020) concluded that outcomes of burnout include; reduced job performance, poor quality care, poor patient safety, adverse events and patient negative experiences. However, Pathway to Excellence® standards address causes of burnout such as low control over the job, poor working climate and low rewards to improve patient outcomes.

### **What we learned.**

- Pathway to Excellence is about a cultural change and transforming the work place to enable nurses to feel engaged and empowered to deliver excellent nursing care. It is based on fun, empowerment and mutual respect.
- Nottingham Childrens Hospital has evidence demonstrating a culture of nursing excellence; however this has not previously been celebrated or recognised through international assessment.
- Nursing as a profession now has a platform to shout and celebrate its value in delivering care excellence.
- The Nottingham Children's Hospital provides world-class care.
- ANCC Pathway to Excellence® accreditation means that NCH has been recognised at an international level as an excellent place for nurses to work with high job satisfaction, professional opportunity, and high staff retention.

### **Conclusion**

This paper has outlined and discussed the change management approach and activities undertaken by the first children's hospital to attain ANCC Pathway to Excellence® accreditation. The ADKAR® principles were key in facilitating and guiding our staff engagement processes. During all phases of the Pathway journey it was essential to raise awareness and engaging all stakeholders. Early staff engagement ensuring inclusivity allowed staff to take ownership of the change in progress. Knowledge was key and

information was provided in various forms throughout the journey with highly visible leadership availability. Key strategies to ensure the organisation's ability to implement the necessary changes were established before the start of the journey.

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**Table 1** Staff engagement activity plan using ADKAR®

Stage	Staff engagement activities	Description
Awareness	Pathway ops team	Various activities were used to bring awareness about the Pathway to Excellence® programme to the staff across the organisation. A Pathway operations team was formed whose responsibility was to go around the organisation with posters, holding meetings and conversations with staff about the programme. Key message from the team was to demonstrate how the organisation was already meeting all the required domain competencies by showing the evidence from current practice.
	Promotional materials	Pathway to Excellence® lanyards, T-shirts, pens and stickers were made available to every clinical area across the organisation. This enabled conversation about the programme at all levels and facilitated necessary staff engagement and questions to be answered with clarity where needed.
	Meetings at all levels	Pathway project lead and the organisation nursing leadership attended various clinical speciality meetings and other healthcare professional meetings presenting on the purpose and benefits of this accreditation.
Desire	Bimonthly newsletter	Communication about Pathway to Excellence® journey progress and what different teams were working on to ensure a culture of nursing excellence, and service improvement projects and staff reward and recognition were outlined in the newsletter demonstrating how we are achieving the competencies.
	Completion of care excellence passports	On completion of care excellence passport staff would receive an organisational badge awarded by the Chief Nurse. The passport required demonstration from staff how their daily care is in line with the pathway competencies. The badge presentations afforded the Chief Nurse a platform to show her appreciation to her staff and answering the question 'Why Pathway to Excellence®?', and 'Why now?'.
	Social media presence	Communication and updates were also available on social media platforms; Twitter and Facebook (twitter hash tag <b>#NCHexcels.</b> )
Knowledge	Glossary of terms	Common Pathway to Excellence® terms were translation in terms of reference from American English to United Kingdom English offering clarity to staff.
	Computer screen severs	Through the organisation's communication department, period computer screen severs on different aspects and common facts about the Pathway were used as a reminder for all staff. This also attracted more conversation from other healthcare groups who supported our journey.
Ability	Staff readiness assessment	Pathway team frequently assessed staff readiness for survey. Through feedback and pulse surveys we were able to identify strengths and further areas for development and more importantly how ready we were for the final assessment. Staff readiness included ensuring staff will have access to computers with appropriate connection as some of the staff were working from home due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

	Gap analysis	To identify areas where further work was required
Reinforcement	Information for new nursing staff	Pathway journey information was made available on start day
	Daily trolley dashes	Daily trolley dashes for 3 months
	Weekly Pathway to Excellence® Trust briefing	Weekly Pathway to Excellence® updates in both video and written format were made available in the organisation briefings. The videos sessions were from a variety of staff across the organisation, from direct care nurses to the Chief Nurse.