The information needs of nurses
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The RCN Information Needs Survey

Aim
In 2004, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) undertook a UK-wide survey to find out what information nurses, health visitors, midwives and health care assistants need to support their practice and lifelong learning.

Methodology
Staff of RCN Library and Information Services carried out a comprehensive literature review of nurses’ information needs. They then developed a questionnaire for nurses in consultation with other RCN colleagues, which was designed with the help of colleagues from the RCN Institute and an independent statistician. The questionnaire investigated:

✦ information or knowledge to improve practice in the clinical area
✦ information needed to support lifelong learning and formal courses of study.

With the help of RCN staff across the UK, 129 RCN learning representatives and health service librarians were recruited on a voluntary basis to act as local champions to distribute the questionnaire.

The target group for the survey was registered nurses, midwives, health care assistants and health visitors - not just RCN members. The survey was carried out between 1 June 2004 and 16 July 2004. Although the questionnaire took each respondent an average of 30 minutes to fill in, the local champions successfully distributed and returned 1,715 questionnaires.

Analysis of the profile of the returned questionnaires showed that responses were received from a good cross-section of our target audience. We therefore had sufficient data to look at how different factors were related to each other; for example, how a respondent’s work sector affected the results.

We would like to thank colleagues from across LIS, as well as RCN staff in other departments, regions and boards, whose help proved invaluable throughout this survey.

1 The literature review has been summarised in the following document: Keys, J (December 2003) Information Needs Analysis – what we want to find out and what the literature tells us. The document is available from Jackie Lord or Rosamund Bertulis at RCN Library and Information Services 020 7647 3610 or email jackie.lord@rcn.org.uk or rosamund.bertulis@rcn.org.uk.
Summary report
This report outlines just a few of the survey’s most interesting findings. It has three sections:

1. general access to information
2. information or knowledge to improve practice in the clinical area
3. information needed to support lifelong learning and formal courses of study.

The main findings of the survey’s analysis are set out in detail in Conclusions at the end. In brief, these conclusions are:

✦ access to information leads to evidence-based practice
✦ the support of employers is crucial
✦ access to a range of information sources is important
✦ access to computers and the internet is still limited
✦ nurses in the independent sector have less access to information
✦ there is a very high demand for more information skills training
✦ value-added information services are required.

A longer report of the survey’s findings contains fuller information; this full report is available from the RCN on 020 7647 3610 or rcn.library@rcn.org.uk

General access to information

Access to computers and the internet

✦ 19% of respondents never use the internet in relation to their work. For respondents who worked in NHS hospitals, this figure was lower at 14.5%, the same percentage was true of those who work in the NHS community sector. In NHS care homes or hospices, the figure is higher at 18%. However, of respondents who work in the independent sector, 45.4% never use the internet in relation to their work.

✦ 49% of respondents could always get access to the internet at work when they needed it, but 17% could never get access to the internet when they needed it. For those who work in the independent sector, 44% could never get access to the internet at work when they needed it.

✦ 15% of all respondents had no access to a computer at work. In the independent sector, 38% had no access to a computer at work.

✦ Of those who did have access to a computer at work, the majority had to share the computer with others. On average, a respondent shared a computer with six other people.
Access to a local health library

- 60% of respondents who worked in NHS hospitals strongly agreed or agreed that a health library was easy to access when they needed it. 38% of respondents who worked in the NHS community sector strongly agreed or agreed with the statement. Only 17% of those who work in the independent sector strongly agreed or agreed that it was easy to access a health library when they needed it.

- There appears to be a regional variation in response (though this might also be accounted for by differences in the profiles of the respondents in those regions). Respondents in the South West found it hardest to access a health library - 41% agreed or strongly agreed that a library was easy to access when they needed it. Respondents in the North West also had limited access, with 47% agreeing or strongly agreeing that it was easy to access a health library when they needed it. The two regions which appear to have the best access were Wales, followed by Yorkshire & Humber; these respondents were most likely to agree that access was easy to a health library when they needed it.

- 43% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that they used a health library regularly. This figure was slightly lower for those who work in NHS community settings at 40%. Only 17% of those who worked in the independent sector either strongly agreed/agreed that they used a health library regularly.

- Those who worked in NHS hospitals were most likely to agree that they did have time to visit the library – 44%. In NHS community settings, 33% were likely to agree that they had time. Only 20% of those who worked in the independent sector agreed that they had time to visit the library.

Awareness and use of information sources and the skills to use them

- 45% of RCN members had seen the RCN website and 38% had seen it and used it regularly.

- 33% of RCN members had seen the RCN Learning Zone and 16% had seen it and used it regularly.

- Only 12.2% of respondents had seen the NMAP website and only 3.7% had seen it and used it regularly.

- 15% of respondents from the English regions had seen the National Electronic Library for Health (NeLH) website and 13% had both seen it and used it regularly.

- 20.5% of respondents had seen the Department of Health's website and 36.7% had seen it and used it regularly.
23.2% of respondents who work in Scotland had seen the Scottish E-lib website and 29% had both seen it and used it regularly.

26.1% of respondents who work in Scotland had seen the Scottish Executive’s website, 42% had both seen it and used it regularly.

Of respondents who work in Northern Ireland, 14.6% had seen the HONNI website, and 17.5% had both seen it and used it regularly.

In Northern Ireland, 23.3% of respondents had seen Northern Ireland’s DHSSPSCNI website, and 28.2% had both seen it and used it regularly.

Of respondents who work in Wales, 15% had seen the Welsh HOWIS website, and 19.6% had both seen it and used it regularly.

17.9% of all respondents had seen their own organisation’s internet or Intranet, 47% of respondents had both seen it and used it regularly.

From what computer and information skills training do respondents feel they would benefit?

30% of all respondents felt they would benefit from basic computer skills training (including how to use email and how to use the internet). In the independent sector, this figure rose to 41%.

44% of respondents felt they would benefit from training in basic information-searching skills. In the independent sector, this rose to 55%.

62% of respondents felt they would benefit from gaining the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL).

74% of respondents felt they would benefit from training in advanced information-searching skills.

The top two choices of training format were one-to-one training and a one day training event.

What improvements would respondents like to see?

89% of respondents said they would always, usually or sometimes want to get more full text articles from more journals via the internet – 40% of those said ‘always’.

88% of respondents said they would always, usually or sometimes like more help to identify the most appropriate articles or reports.
79% of respondents said they would always, usually or sometimes like more help when they are doing a literature search.

When given a blank box to add what they thought were the most important improvements, 1,036 respondents made at least one choice. The top four choices for the most important improvement were:
1. better access to computers and the internet
2. better training on where and how to find information
3. more time to study during working hours
4. better access to more full text journals at no extra cost.

58% would use a list of useful websites for their field of practice at least once a month – with 41% saying they would use such a facility daily or weekly. 46% would use an email summarising news in their specialist areas at least once a month; slightly more popular at 49% would be critical appraisal of new research and regular guidance on how new research could change their nursing practice. However, only 38% would use a part of the RCN website dedicated to their field of practice at least once a month, with only 20% saying they would use such a facility daily or weekly.

45% of all respondents said they were always encouraged to search for evidence to support their practice, though 20% stated they were never encouraged to search for evidence. In the independent sector, although a slightly higher percentage compared with NHS hospitals were always encouraged to search for evidence during working hours, 29% were never encouraged to do so.

33% of all respondents stated that they were always encouraged to search for evidence to support their practice in their own free time. 18% said they never received such encouragement.

34% reported that there was a process at work where they could have an input into changing practice. 50% said there was sometimes a process. 14% said there was never a process.

20% of respondents said it was always acceptable for them to leave their
workplace to search for evidence to support their practice; 47% said it was sometimes acceptable. 33% of all respondents said it was never acceptable for them to leave their workplace to search for evidence.

Statistical analysis showed that if a respondent’s employer encouraged their employees to search for evidence, allowed them to leave their workplace and had a process for the employee to have input into changing practice, then the employee was more likely to search for evidence during working hours and more likely to change their nursing practice as a result of research. In addition, respondents whose employer offered this type of support and encouragement were more likely to search for evidence in their own time i.e. while not being paid.

Those respondents who said they always or sometimes changed their nursing practice as a result of research:

- 72% always or usually had access to the internet when they needed it
- 66% always or usually felt confident when searching for information on the internet
- 35% said there was always or usually someone available at work to help them with finding the best information on the internet
- 50% said that the Health library was easy to access when they needed it
- 58% said there was help available when they were searching electronic databases.

Comparing this to respondents who said they never changed their nursing practice as a result of research:

- 41% always or usually had access to the internet when they needed it
- 49% always or usually felt confident when searching for information on the internet
- 25% said there was always or usually someone available at work to help them with finding the best information on the internet
- 35% said that the Health library was easy to access when they needed it
- 37% said there was help available when they were searching electronic databases.
Those respondents who said they always or sometimes searched for evidence to support their practice during working hours, were also more likely to have better access to the internet, better access to a library and better information skills. The full report includes the figures for the very strong statistical evidence of these relationships, but here are some examples of respondents who always or sometimes searched for evidence to support their practice during working hours:

- 79% always or usually had access to the internet when they needed it
- 70% always or usually felt confident when searching for information on the internet
- 38% said there was always or usually someone available at work to help them with finding the best information on the internet
- 53% said that the Health library was easy to access when they needed it
- 60% said there was help available when they were searching electronic databases.

Compare this to respondents who said they never searched for evidence to support their practice during working hours:

- 45% always or usually felt confident when searching for information on the internet
- 18% said there was always or usually someone available at work to help them with finding the best information on the internet
- 31% said that a health library was easy to access when they needed it
- 38% said there was help available when they were searching electronic databases.
Information needed to support lifelong learning and formal courses of study

Hours of study

- On average, respondents studied 8.9 hours per month during working hours, but there was a wide variation in responses (nursing students were excluded from this analysis).

- On average, respondents studied for 10.8 hours per month during their own time i.e. when not being paid. Again, there was a wide variation in responses (nursing students were excluded from this analysis).

Again, there is an obvious link between the effects of a employer’s positive attitude towards searching for evidence and the amount of hours respondents were prepared to spend on studying and lifelong learning. In particular:

- being encouraged to search for evidence increases the number of hours that nurses study during working hours and in their own time.

- respondents who said it was always or sometimes acceptable for them to leave their workplace to search for evidence to support their practice, were more likely to study more hours in their own time.

- respondents who said they did change their practice as a result of research were more likely to study more hours during work time and in their own time.

- respondents who said they always or sometimes searched for evidence to support their practice in their own time, were more likely to study in their own time.

- respondents who felt that research did affect their practice were also more likely to study more hours in their own time.

- respondents who felt there was never a process at work where they could have an input into changing nursing practice were more likely to study fewer hours during working hours.

Access to computers and the internet

- When asked if they could get access to the internet when they had time to study, 42% said they always could, and only 7% said they never could. For those who work in the independent sector, 13% could never get access to the internet when they had time to study. Respondents who worked night shifts were less likely to be able to get access to the internet when they had time to study.
There appears to be a regional variation in response to access to the internet when the respondent has time to study, though this could also be accounted for by differences in the profiles of the respondents in those regions. Respondents in Northern Ireland were the most likely to say that they never had access to the internet when they had time to study (18.2%), followed by respondents in Wales (11.8%). In contrast, respondents in the South East were the least likely to say they could never get access to the internet when they had time to study (2.5%). Respondents in the South West were the most likely to say that they always or usually could get access to the internet when they had time to study (86%).

There is a clear link between using evidence to change practice and having access to the internet when respondents have time to study:

- 74% of respondents who always or sometimes changed their nursing practice as a result of research always or usually had access to the internet when they had time to study
- Only 52% of respondents who said they never changed their nursing practice as a result of research always or usually had access to the internet when they had time to study

- 77% of respondents who always or sometimes searched for evidence to support their practice during working hours always or usually had access to the internet when they had time to study
- Only 54% of respondents who said they never searched for evidence to support their practice during working hours always or usually had access to the internet when they had time to study.
Conclusions

✦ Access to information leads to evidence-based practice

When nurses have good access to information – via the internet and a library, and using good information skills – there is a direct effect on their putting evidence into practice. Those with the best access to information were also more likely both to search for evidence and to change their nursing practice as a result of research.

✦ The support of employers is crucial

The evidence is clear that if a respondent’s employer encourages their employees to search for evidence, allows them to leave their workplace to find information, and has a process for the employee to have input into changing practice, then the employee is more likely to search for evidence during working hours and more likely to change their nursing practice as a result of research. In addition, respondents whose employer offers this type of support and encouragement are more likely to search for evidence in their own time, that is while not being paid.

✦ Access to a range of information sources is important

Respondents who search for evidence during working hours or in their own time, or who report changing their practice as a result of research, are much more likely to find a whole range of information resources useful both for improving clinical practice and lifelong learning.

✦ Access to computers and the internet is still limited

A significant number of respondents (15%) still have no access to a computer at work, with 17% never having access to the internet at work when they need it. Local and regional differences are reported in accessing information and the internet.

✦ Nurses in the independent sector have less access to information

Those who work in the independent sector report having less access to information, particularly those working in independent care homes. This is true of access to the internet, access to a library and for access limited due to lack of information skills.

✦ There is a very high demand for more information skills training

✦ Value-added information services are required

There is a high demand for valued added information services which help nurses find good quality, up to date, relevant evidence in manageable amounts. Respondents want physical and electronic libraries, librarians as well as online services.
Notes
The RCN represents nurses and nursing, promotes excellence in practice and shapes health policies.