

ARE WE ON THE BRINK OF A NURSING CRISIS?

Discover how admin workloads threaten thousands of clinical roles



April 2024





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Summary

Given the growing and much reported NHS backlog, workload has been consistently rising for clinicians. But what does this mean? We hear that doctors and nurses are busier than ever, but what tasks are keeping them occupied for the most time? If we understand this question, we can begin to overcome the challenge.

Focussing on nurses, SPS and the RCNi (Royal College of Nursing's Information and Learning subsidiary) launched a joint survey with the goal of building an accurate picture of a clinician's workload, and why so many nurses seem to be ready to leave the profession.

While it's easy to assume pay was the biggest concern given the looming nurses' strikes, our survey found that only 9% listed pay as the main reason for wanting to leave, whereas 45% cited workload or admin specifically as the key reason. The headline figure we found is that a quarter of surveyed nurses are considering leaving.

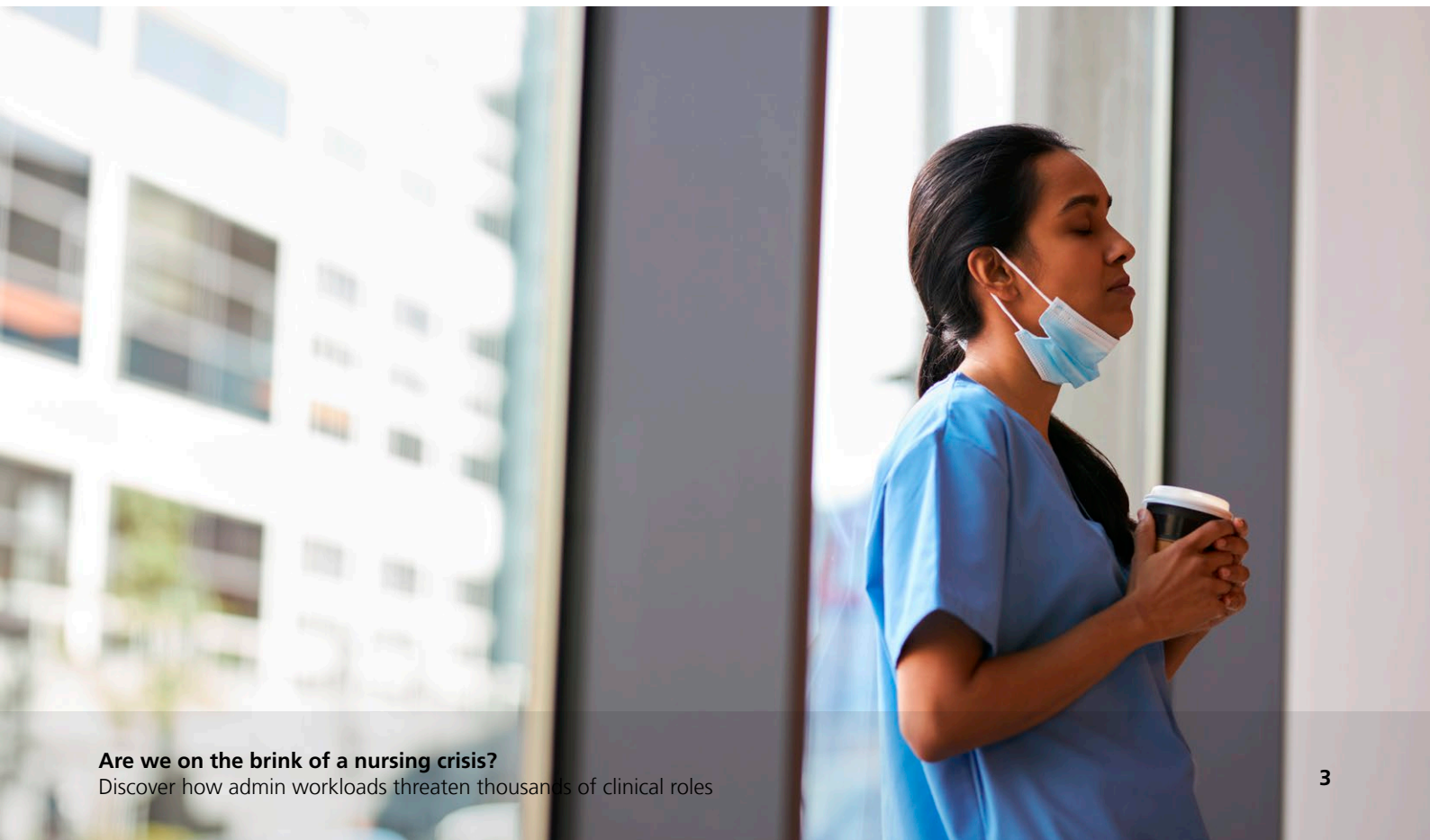
The rest of the findings supported an over-reliance on nurses to complete admin work. 42% of nurses in our survey group spend half their working week or more on non-clinical admin — that translates to £61 million of annual spend for a mid-sized trust or £13 billion across the entire NHS.

Inefficient and dated admin practises are one of the largest contributors to a nurse's daily workload and drive down their job satisfaction — now is the time to modernise. For a sustainable future for the NHS, nurses and the patients they care for, admin transformation should be the next priority.

At a Glance

SPS and the RCNi (Royal College of Nursing's Information and Learning subsidiary) ran a joint survey focussing on nurse's workloads in September 2023.

- There were 2,797 responses.
- 42% of nurses spend at least half their working week on non-clinical admin.
- £13 billion worth of clinicians' time is spent on clinical and non-clinical admin.
- 25% of nurses are considering leaving the profession, with;
- 45% citing workload or admin specifically as the key reason, and only 9% identifying pay.



What makes nurses consider leaving the profession?



For NHS trusts it is vital that nurses can perform at the top of their game. We want to keep them well-rested, motivated and available to care for their patients. However, this is a far cry from the current situation — with pay disputes, workload challenges, soaring nursing vacancies, and thousands leaving the profession altogether. It is clear that nurses need some support, but to find out how best to help we wanted to ask them directly.

SPS and the RCNi ran a survey of nurses across the UK, with the goal of finding out how impactful the challenges that nurses face are. We wanted to breakdown the amount of time nurses spend on their daily tasks, learn how many of those daily tasks are focussed on clinical care, and whether their workload plays a role in feeling dissatisfied with nursing in general.

From 2,797 responses, we uncovered which challenges nurses find most disruptive to their professional lives, how satisfied they are with their jobs, and even how likely they are to stay in the profession. We uncovered some valuable — and potentially unexpected — results, but the one finding that stood out was the amount of time spent completing admin tasks and the impact of admin on patient care.



423,000 NHS Nurses¹

Nurses are an indispensable part of the UK health system and make up about a third of the UK's health population.

Although there are around 400,000 NHS nurses, there are around 800,000² registered nurses across the UK, with the remainder working across private institutions or as part of agencies providing overflow support to the NHS.²

- ¹ Lucina Rolewicz, et al, The Nuffield Trust, Feb 2024
- ² The Nursing and Midwifery Council, Nov 2023



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Where does the time go?

Understanding workload

One of the key objectives we had in mind when distributing the survey was to breakdown exactly what a typical nurse's workload consists of. The survey aimed to dissect exactly how nurses' hours are split; and the data we uncovered makes for alarming reading.

We found that 42% nurses spend over 20 hours of their working week on non-clinical admin tasks — a significant amount of time spent doing tasks that don't require a highly trained nurse to complete.

And on the clinical side, 64% of our respondents said that they spend at least 20 hours of their time on clinical admin. Of course, nurses will always need to spend some of their time on clinical admin, filling in medical reports for example. That does not mean these activities cannot be streamlined — filling in those reports using digital dictation perhaps — but clinical admin improvement tends to come at a higher cost and higher difficulty.

Ultimately, nurses are trained clinicians, taught over at least three years (equating to £67,000 of public spend according to the Department of Health and Social Care³) to deliver quality primary care to NHS patients. That such a high percentage of nurses are spending half of their working week — if not more — completing admin tasks points directly at the root of the problem.

These figures clearly demonstrate that rebalancing a nurse's workload should be our priority, rather than simply hiring more.



42%
of nurses

spend over 20 hours on
non-clinical admin



64%
of nurses

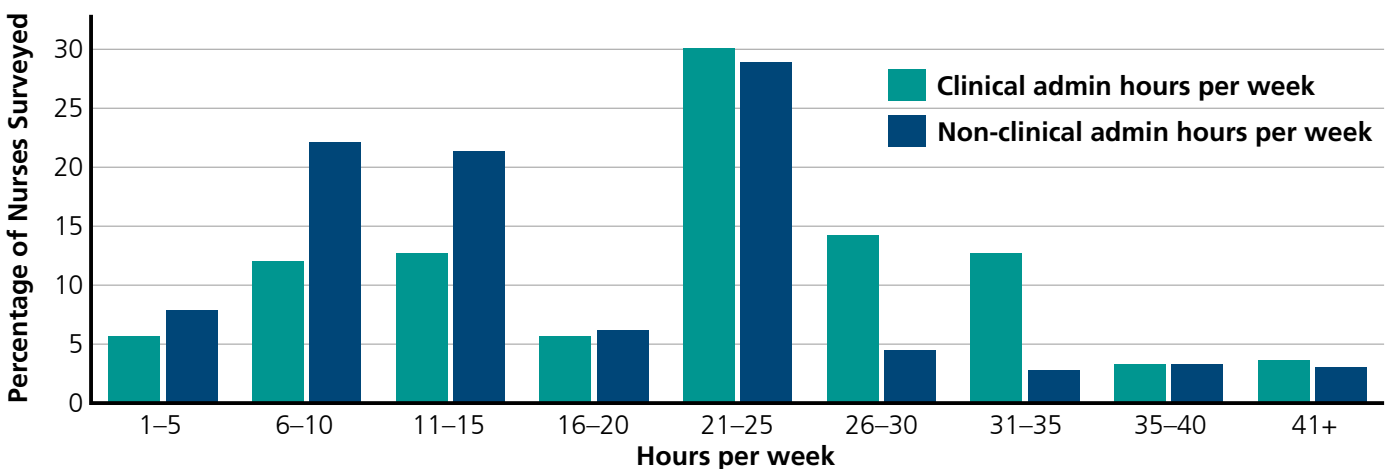
spend over 20 hours on
clinical admin



£67,000

to train one nurse

Hours per week spent on clinical and non-clinical admin tasks



3 UK Parliament (referencing The Department of Health and Social Care), April 2023

A quarter of nurses are considering leaving

Sky-high vacancies but low retention

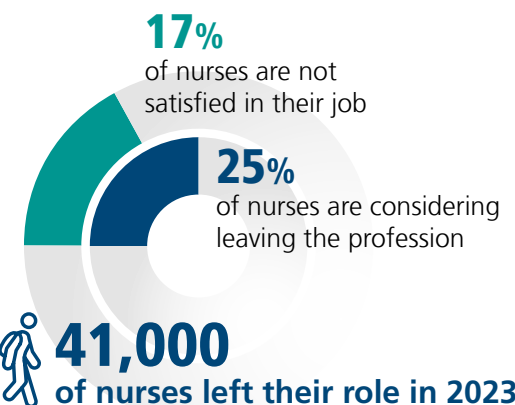
The patient backlog lingering from Covid has kept workloads consistently high and only trending further upward — but this is not a new trend. The Health Foundation found⁴ that the NHS waiting list has consistently grown over the last ten years, with Covid only exacerbating the problem. Trying to scale up the nursing supply to meet demand is why the NHS currently has 40,000 nursing vacancies — and because so many nurses have been leaving the profession.

The Guardian reported⁵ in the summer of 2023 that 170,000 NHS workers had left their roles in the previous year, notably including more than 41,000 nurses. The results of our survey indicate that many nurses are still on the brink, with a quarter of those surveyed saying they are considering leaving nursing altogether.

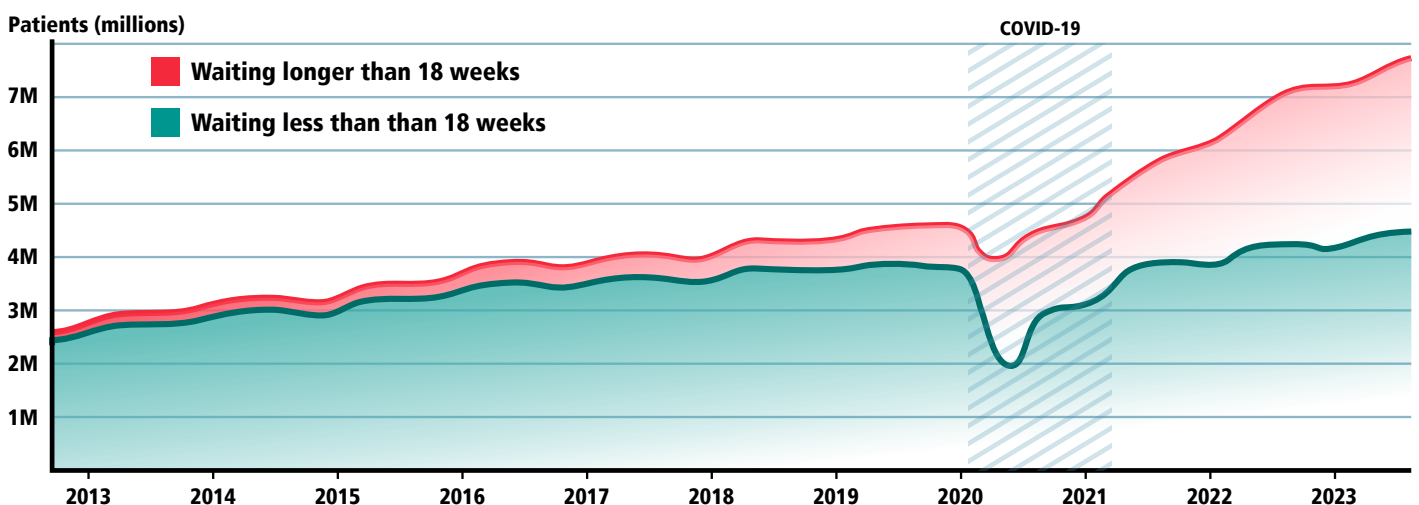
If a quarter of nurses across the country are considering leaving, the NHS stands to lose 105,000 nurses. This finding was despite only 17% of respondents saying they no longer enjoy being a nurse, meaning trusts risk losing staff that would prefer to stay.

If these dissatisfied nurses were to run out of patience with their role in the next year the figures would make for sobering reading for NHS decision-makers (and the nurses left to fill the void). 145,000 nursing vacancies would be a critical deficit, and one that must be avoided at all costs. The first step to building job satisfaction is to find out what's wrong, so we asked nurses exactly that.

 **40,000**
nursing vacancies



The patient backlog is increasing waiting times



4 Kathryn Marszalek et al, The Health Foundation, 2023

5 Jon Ungoed-Thomas, The Guardian, July 2023

Nurses say workload hits morale harder than pay

Why are nurses feeling so jaded?

With nurses striking over working conditions and pay, it would be easy to assume that a lack of salary increase might be the driving force behind resignations, but only 9% of our respondents cited pay as their main reason to leave nursing.

However, almost a quarter of those surveyed highlighted workload as the biggest factor, and a further 20% answered “too much admin”. Pay, in fact, was only the fourth most common reason nurses considered leaving.

The survey findings point to the fact that workload is the key issue that’s driving nurses to leave the profession, or at the very least dragging down job satisfaction. And these findings track with another recent study reported by Pulse⁶ that “stress and high workload are the main reasons staff leave the NHS”.

Of course, part of a nurse’s job will always be clinical and non-clinical admin, but based on our findings the balance is clearly off. The NHS has leaned on bank staff and new hires, but it has only papered over the cracks. In an NHS increasingly stripping back budgets and freezing recruitment, our current nurses are a valuable commodity and their job retention must be paramount. Especially with the high cost of replacing them or training new nurses.



9%
considered leaving over low pay



45%
considered leaving due to workload or admin

Reasons cited for leaving the profession

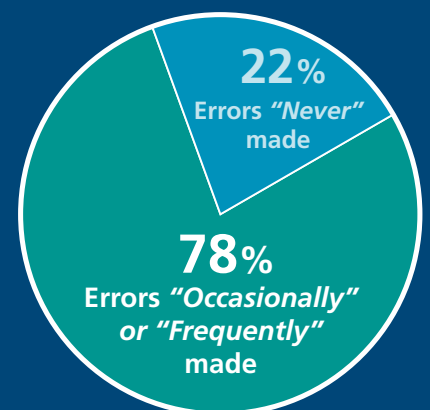


6 Anna Colivicchi, Pulse, Sep 2023

Margin for error

An overworked nurse is a less effective nurse, and the risk of mistakes is significantly higher if a nurse’s day extends to ten or twelve hours to finalise day-to-day admin tasks.

78% of surveyed nurses admitted administrative errors impact their role at least “occasionally” — how many of these errors affect a patient’s treatment? It is easy to see how inefficient admin leads to a lower quality of care.



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Spending clinical time on admin is unaffordable

Finances are becoming ever tighter

Budgets for individual trusts are being squeezed and CIP targets becoming larger, despite many 'quick-win' savings levers having already been pulled. Despite this, the NHS is still forecasted to overspend its budget by £7 billion⁷ this year. With these challenges in mind, having nurses spend half their time on non-clinical admin represents an extremely costly stopgap.

Extrapolating the data from our survey upwards we can reach an overall figure for the cost of spending nurses time on non-clinical admin: £13 billion across the NHS, and £61million for a mid-sized trust. With many trusts looking to make savings wherever they can, this represents an astronomical figure to spend on an inefficient solution. Admin alone is already the fourth-highest area of spend for trusts, so using nurses to take up the slack only adds to the financial impact.

And the impact only grows when the level of nurses that make up this spend is considered. 37% of the nurses we surveyed were band 5, staff vital in providing patients' day-to-day care needs. With admin workload a problem across all pay bands, a significant amount of senior nurses' salaries are spent on tasks that could be completed just as well by a band 2, 3 or 4 nurse. The NHS is paying well over the odds to resolve non-clinical admin tasks.

The value of unpaid overtime

The lack of time nurses have to focus on patient care is highlighted by the amount of unpaid overtime taken. In response to the survey, 64% of nurses shared that they work a minimum of six hours unpaid overtime, with 18% working more than 11 hours every week. All in all, 100% of nurses surveyed work at least some overtime in a typical week.

If all this overtime was paid across the UK, NHS costs would rise by another £3.5 billion. Nurses being willing to work overtime to fulfil patient needs is a cornerstone of the health service, but how long until the NHS uses up nurses' goodwill? Budgets are too stretched and nurses too vital to risk another ticking time bomb.

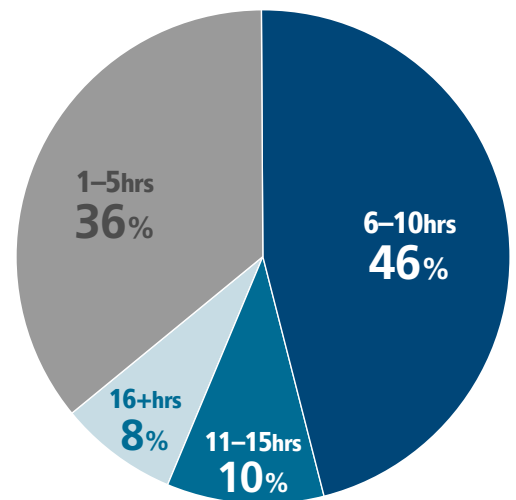


£13 billion

The annual cost of leaving non-clinical admin to nurses ...

£61 million

for a mid-size trust



Overtime in a typical week

7 Toby Helm and Denis Campbell, The Guardian, Sep 2023

Temporary staff are an expensive solution

Growing workload only leads to more cost

These costs hit even harder given the use of agency staff to fill frontline care vacancies caused by the admin workload. The Guardian reports⁸ that the NHS now spends £10 billion annually on temporary staff, including £5.8 billion just on clinical staff to plug gaps in rotas with extra bank shifts.

This rising spend has even led to fears more nurses would leave NHS trusts, choosing instead to take up better paid agency roles. The RCNi even reported last year⁹ that NHS nurses were facing potential bans from taking agency work to protect against further staff losses. New guidance leaked to HSJ¹⁰ even suggests the Integrated Care Systems will be given a cap on agency spend — 3.2% of their overall bills, a figure 0.5% lower than last year's spend. The NHS wants everyone to find a more affordable alternative, so how much could be saved by alleviating the non-clinical admin burden?

Using figures from our survey, we can derive a huge indicative cost saving, whilst improving patient experience. Comparing the number of hours spent on non-clinical admin as it is today versus using specialist (even temporary) admin staff for the same work, we can reach a saving of £6.5 billion across the NHS.

Having specialist admin staff dedicated to providing patient administration allows nurses to deliver the care they trained for – and the reason why many became nurses in the first place. This approach gets nurses back to the healthcare frontline and reinvests their full salaries into maximising clinical performance.

8 Denis Campbell, The Guardian, Jan 2024

9 Alison Stacey, Nursing Standard (RCNi), Jul 2023

10 Henry Anderson, Health Service Journal, Feb 2024



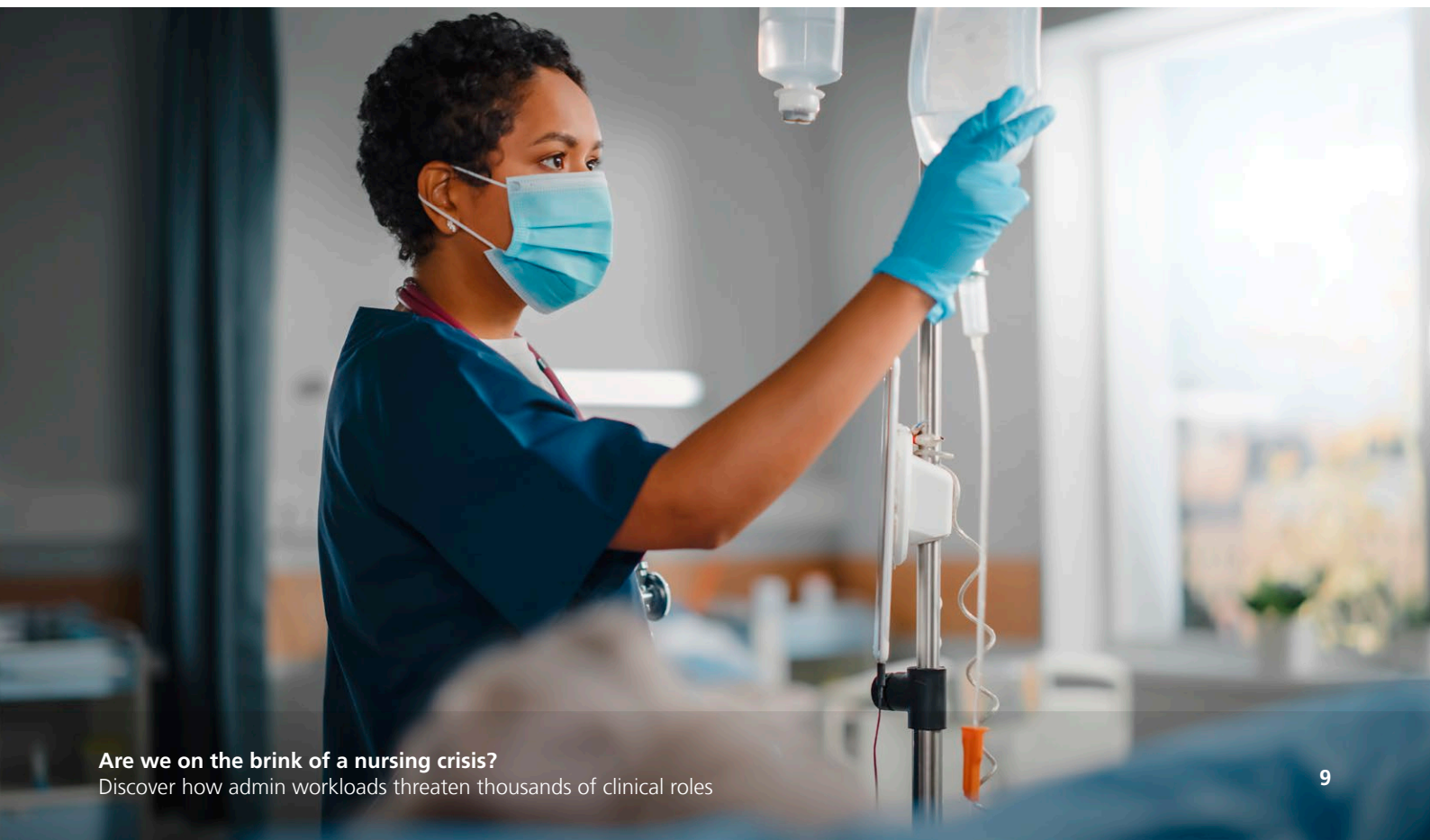
£10 billion

The annual cost of temporary staff⁸



£6.5 billion

could be saved by using specialist staff for admin, rather than agency nurses



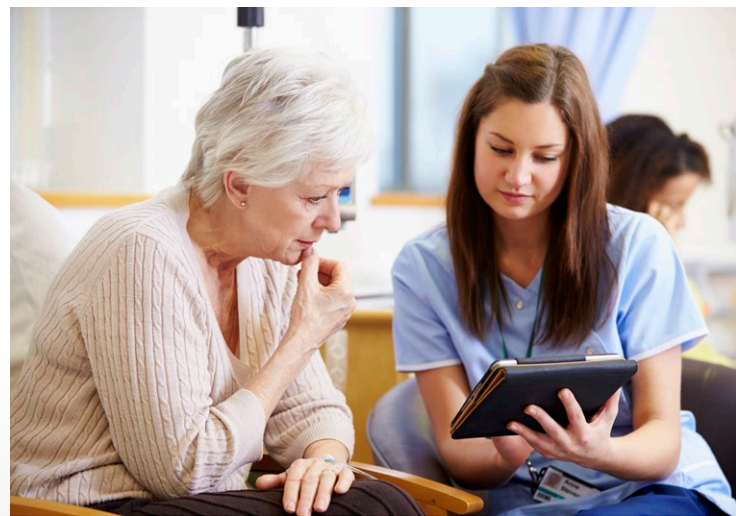
Conclusion

The impact of inefficiency on the NHS is huge, and the only investment into overcoming the challenge has been in expensive bank staff. These staff have become a significant cost themselves, and do not seem to be reducing workload or improving full-time nurses' job satisfaction. The situation facing the NHS is approaching crisis levels: patient care is declining in quality while costs continue to skyrocket.

Nurses' wellbeing and job retention are at an all-time low, so how dire must the situation be before a change is made? Will more patients have to wait for critical cancer treatment? Or will vulnerable and minority patients see their health inequalities increase with support structures too overworked to help? Nurses have already held strike action – how much more disruption will they have to cause until they're listened to?

We already know the steps we can take to make a difference: lowering the reliance on nursing staff, both substantive as well as bank and agency nurses, to complete non-clinical admin tasks will save significant costs, improve patient care and help revive job satisfaction for nurses. Investing in the appropriate resource for the appropriate task can make a difference. But as more and more staff queue up to leave, time is of the essence for the NHS.

Act now to prove to nurses that their hours are more valued in front of a patient instead of behind a desk.





We have worked in collaboration with NHS trusts to accurately baseline the current issues and define the future state for back-office administration services that deliver world class patient experience with guaranteed recurrent savings. Based on our analysis, cost reduction is the result of improving patient experience.

To find out more about our approach to world class administration services and understand the level of guaranteed savings we can deliver for your trust, please reach out to us.

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