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### Article

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# **Entry perceptions of community nursing roles of a cohort of first year pre-registration nurses.**

## **Abstract**

Nursing is the largest qualified professional workforce in the UK with TV programmes, films, books and other media sources frequently informing views of nursing roles. This study examines first year pre-registration nursing students' perceptions of community nursing roles, using a qualitative design and questionnaire. Pre-registration nursing students took part from a university in Northwest England: a mean of 240 and 68.5% across all questions. Of those invited 267 were adult, 53 mental health and 30 child students. Data were collected using an online questionnaire across two groups and analysed thematically. Four questions were considered relating to students' knowledge on community nursing. Results uncovered gaps in the knowledge and community roles were perceived as less dynamic than secondary care roles, correlating to clinical tasks and popularised media sources. Results provided insight into student nurse perceptions, offering an understanding from which to construct a more inclusive community focused nursing curriculum.

## **Keywords**

Community, pre-registration, education, nursing roles, perception

## **Introduction**

Nursing is often considered a rewarding career, with many opportunities to develop personally and professionally, (Seitovirta et al, 2018). Perceptions of nursing roles are frequently informed by peripheral sources, which may manufacture an unrealistic image of the contemporary nurse for students embarking upon their professional

journey, (Glerean et al, 2017). Pre-registration nursing education can provide an opportunity to develop role modelling, generate a sense of belonging to a profession, and can be considered pivotal for both academic and clinical experiences, (Hill, 2020). Student nurses are the future of the nursing workforce and as such must be prepared for complex roles, other than those portrayed by external influences, (Slattery et al, 2016). This study examines a cohort of pre-registration student nurse perceptions of community nursing roles, to establish their understanding of the diverse nursing roles in the community setting. The underpinning knowledge will be instrumental in managing expectations, considering future placement learning opportunities and in preparing the students for their role in a professional workforce over the course of undergraduate education. The research findings may help to inform development of the current curricula and student experience to incorporate community care as an attractive option for a future career for pre-registration nurses.

## **1. Background**

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) (2018) in their standards for the pre-registration nursing identified it is essential that student nurses are equipped with the skills required to work across both community and secondary care settings. This can be achieved by ensuring student nurses have practice learning opportunities in a variety of settings to meet the holistic requirements of people across all age groups prior to registration.

The nursing workforce accounts for approximately one quarter of NHS staff, with registered nurses acknowledged as the largest qualified professional workforce in the UK, (National Audit Office (NAO), 2020). Nevertheless, the nursing profession faces a workforce crisis due to its high staff turnover, shortage of nurse educators and an unbalanced workforce distribution, (Haddad, Annamaraju and Toney-Butler, 2020).

Policies identified the need for a shift in services from hospital to community care, but this ambition has not been realised, with priority areas such as primary care, mental health and learning disabilities still in decline, (DH 2019b, Buchan et al, 2019). It must be recognised that the measurement of the primary care workforce is globally challenged because of its vast array of clinical professionals and other contributing non-professional, independent providers, (Maclean et al 2014). Key documents such as Advancing our health: prevention in the 2020s and the Long Term plan, emphasised health promotion and disease prevention as a key strategy in healthcare, (DOH, 2019, DOH, 2019b). Despite this, it is estimated that the community has an aging workforce verging toward retirement, with shortages mainly prevalent in the community, with nursing numbers in 2018 estimated to have fallen to half of the 2010 total, (RCN, 2018, The Queens Nurse Institute (QNI), 2014). Statistics reveal that the number of school nurses has diminished by another 3.1% during 2018/2019 across England, despite research to suggest these services provide a cost effective preventative approach, (Buchan et al, 2019). A recent audit by the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (RCPCH) reported that only 14.9% of acute services are sustained by round-the-clock community children's nursing provision, (RCPCH, 2018). Whilst, 60% of health visitors expressed concerns that a focus on just those at risk will dilute the notion of a universal service due to understaffed caseloads, (Institute of Health Visiting (IHV), 2018).

The expansion of workloads and the pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic mean that community nurses are in the background 'silently' delivering complex care to people in their own homes, (Green et al, 2020).The WHO (2020) echo this and note that nurses are the eyes and ears of the communities they serve, having intimate

knowledge and skills which require long term investment in areas of recruitment, education and leadership.

The COVID-19 pandemic enhanced the profile of nurses but the positive media portrayal of the profession has come under scrutiny by way of using hero discourse to normalise a nurse's exposure to risk and compliance to practice, (Mohammed et al, 2021). Barrett and Heale (2021) highlighted concerns relating to public perceptions of nurses as self-sacrificing angels, with superhuman qualities. They acknowledge that whilst this is meant well, it can contribute to misconceptions surrounding the high level skill set actually required for the role. In 2021, the UK witnessed a 32% increase year on year in nursing applications with a 40% rise in male applicants and a 39% increase from the over 35's, thought to be inspired by the efforts of nursing professionals during the COVID-19 pandemic, (University and Colleges Admissions Service 2021, Ford 2021). However, it is unclear whether this surge in applications is due to the public's perception of nurses subsequently reaching "meteoric heights in the public's mind", (Lauder 2020). Although this has stimulated enrolment, it can be argued that the perception of nursing appears to be from the context of a global pandemic, with the immediate focus on acute care. According to The Kings Fund (2020) compared to other parts of the NHS community services, are poorly understood despite their vital contribution in improving health outcomes. Consequently, we may surmise that student nurses' initial perspectives of the nursing contribution to community services may also be misguided.

As a follow on from this research, if such perceptions are evident, then the research team will also seek to raise awareness of contemporary nursing roles to change student nurses' perspectives, to improve the allure of community roles in an attempt to address the deficit.

## **2.1 Objectives**

The objectives of the study were to understand the perceptions of current first year pre-registration students on the Nursing BSc (Hons) programme within a Northwest university, specific to community nursing roles via a series of questions. For the purpose of the study community nursing was defined as nursing outside of a traditional hospital setting.

## **3. Methods**

### **3.1 Design**

The study design used the qualitative method of a survey, collecting data using an online questionnaire comprising three open questions and one closed question. The questions were structured and directive in order for the research team to identify a baseline of students' knowledge and any substantive gaps on commencement of their nursing education. Obtaining two types of data concurrently during the same data collection session has been acknowledged to be challenging, (Creswell and Clark, 2017). The study generated theory from the data collected, and therefore draws on the concepts of a grounded theory study, (Holloway and Galvin, 2016).

The students were in week 2 of the pre-registration nursing education programme and therefore had not had any pre delivered curriculum knowledge which would promote bias. The introduction of a technological system to capture the information, may also have accounted for the high participation and response rate.

### **3.2 Participants**

Eligible participants were recruited during the second week of the pre-registration nursing programme of study. The total nursing cohort comprised of 350 students with 267 adult, 53 mental health and 30 child nursing students; all were invited to participate with 282 pre-registration student nurses taking part. A population study can be described as a group of individuals who share a common characteristic from which the researchers seek knowledge or information, (Allen 2017). In this research, the commonality was all the participants were student nurses embarking on a new programme of study.

### 3.3 Data Collection

Data were collected in two group sessions, students accessed an online questionnaire on the same day. This was accessible to all students with a mobile or connecting device and preserved anonymity. This method was beneficial as it enabled the researchers to gather information in its entirety in a limited time with minimal resources. Four questions asked were;

- 1) *“Can you identify different nursing roles that you would find in the community?”*
- 2) *“Do you see yourself working in the community upon qualification?”*
- 3) *“What portrayals of community nursing can you recall that you have seen in TV/film/programmes/book or other media sources?”*
- 4) *“Which words do you think best described community nurses?”*

The respondent's results were instant and the students were given the opportunity to ask questions after the session.

### 3.4 Data Analysis

The study utilised the method of thematic analysis which is which identifies and interprets patterns and meaning within qualitative data, (Vaismoradi, 2016). According to Nowell (2017), qualitative research is increasingly recognised and valued, and thematic analysis can be used alongside this to identify, organise and report themes. Hence, a robust thematic analysis can produce valid findings and is useful for investigating perspectives and insights within qualitative studies, such as the proposed study, (Braun & Clarke, 2006, King 2004).

### 3.5 Methodological Considerations

The researchers considered the limitations to this study once it was evaluated. The study intentionally employed simplistic questions and a design which could not explore the student's answers in any depth. A longitudinal study of this cohort may provide the opportunity to further clarify areas of ambiguity that the initial question group has exposed. The study relied on a level of digital literacy and the capability of the students to use mobile devices and access the questionnaire. This did not prove problematic due to the high response rate, however, there may still have been signal or user issues which could have prevented participation. The researchers have confidence that the above limitations have not undermined the purpose of the initial study. These outcomes contribute to limited literature available on this subject.

### 3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was granted through the university that the research took place in, approval reference 21/NAH/011. Information about the study, including its potential significance and the risks and benefits of participation were communicated to the students prior to the research and this is a requirement as best practice, (Bowrey and



Thompson, 2014). Participation was voluntary and consent was implied by the participant's decision to actively engage in the questionnaire. Respondents were provided with time to ask questions before and after the study and were aware that they could withdraw or decline to take part at any point without consequence. These are in keeping with the underlying principles of nursing practice, as stated within the Nursing and Midwifery Code of Professional Conduct, (NMC, 2018).

#### 4. Findings

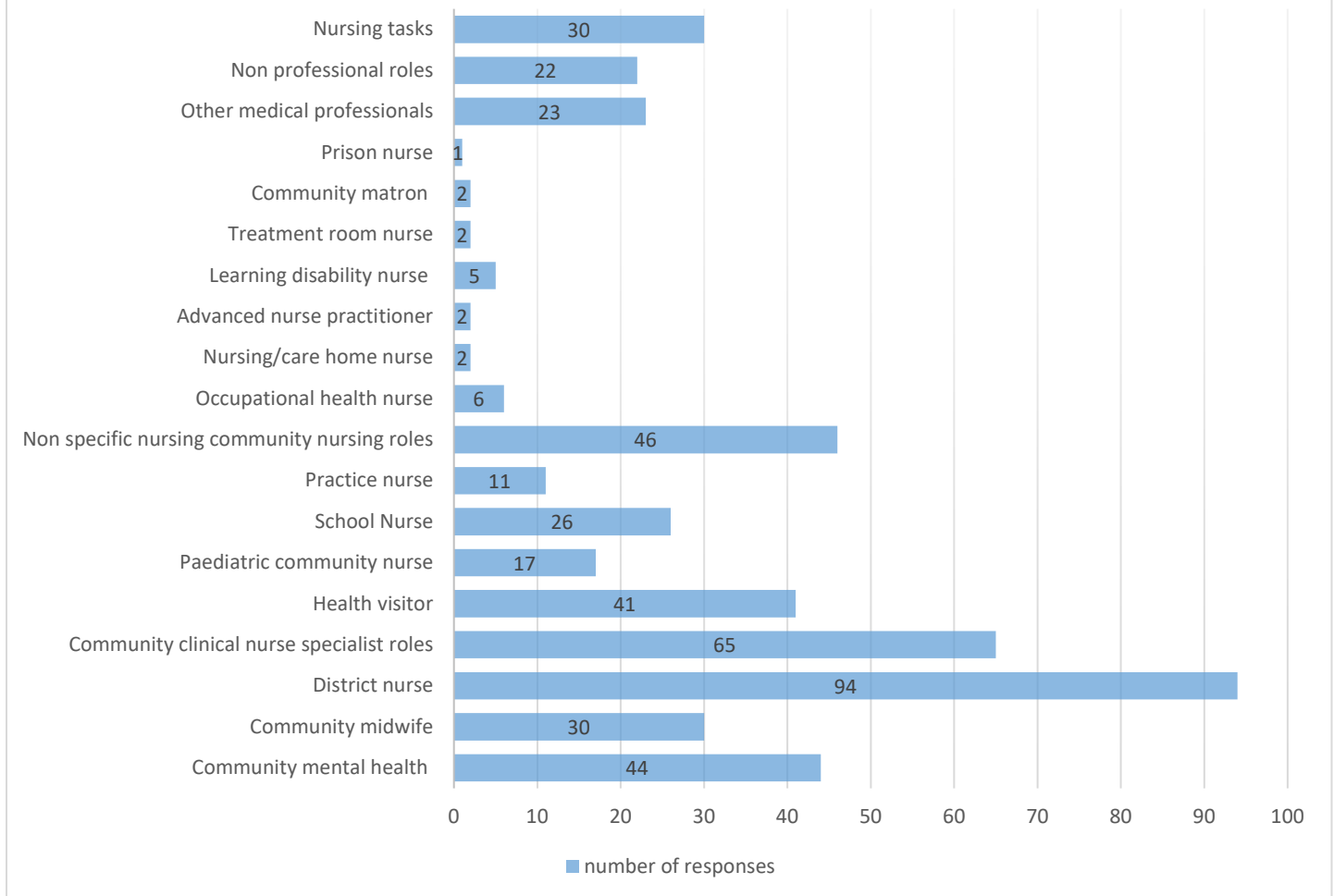
The participation rate varied across the 4 questions, from a cohort of 350 students there was a mean response rate of 240, a percentage of 68.5%. Some explanations for non-response could be down to time constraints and having limited time for participants to think about the answers. A lack of knowledge or ability to answer all questions or connectivity problems may also help to explain these variances.

##### 4.1 Community nursing roles

Nursing students were asked to identify different nursing roles they would find in the community and 233 participants responded. Participants were able to respond with multiple answers, with most providing at several answers.

Table 1. The below graph demonstrates the number of responses to describe the role.

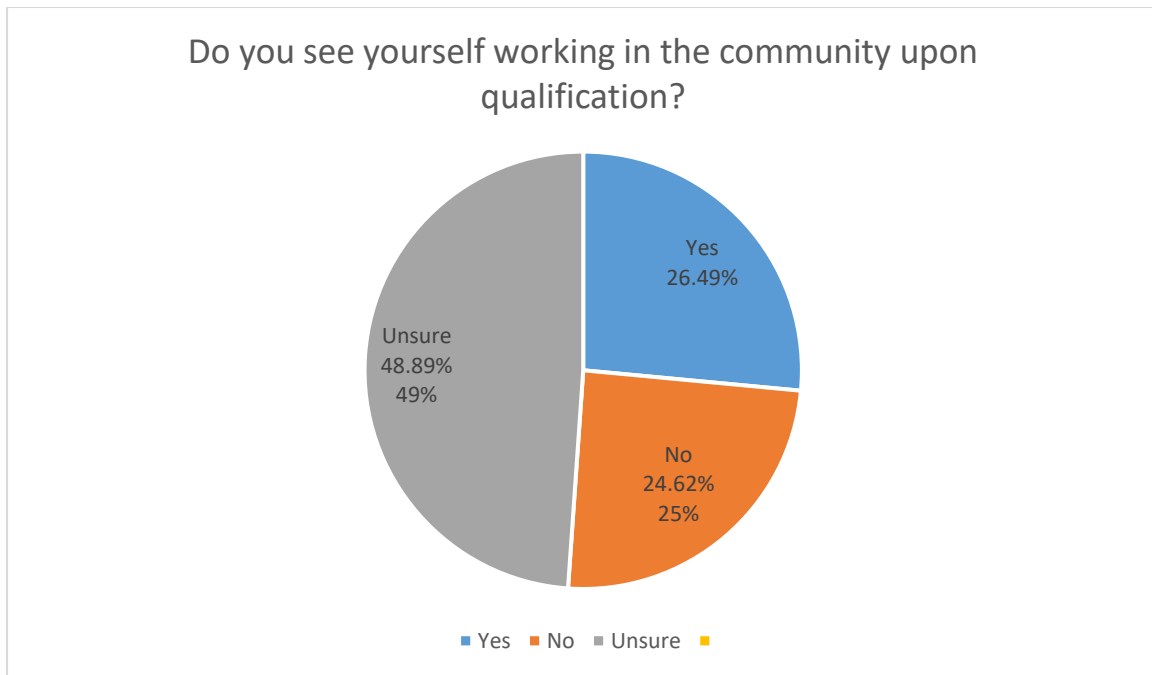
## Q1. CAN YOU IDENTIFY DIFFERENT NURSING ROLES THAT YOU WOULD FIND IN THE COMMUNITY?



### 4.2 Working in the community

Students were then asked if they could visualise themselves working in the community upon qualification. Between 2 groups 268 students responded.

Table 2. The below chart demonstrates the number of students in percentages



#### 4.3 Sources informing perceptions

The next question aimed to explore the effect that TV, films, programmes, books and other media resources may have had on student’s perceptions of community nursing. 229 students participated to answer this question. Television in the form of programmes, news, documentaries and popular series featured most prominently as being influential to students. The results were split into main themes in the table below in order of popularity;

Table 3. Demonstrates themes from resources informing perceptions

Themes-	Common resources cited
1. Secondary care	"24 hours in A and E", "Trauma", "Casualty", "Holby City"
2. Maternity	"Call the midwife", "One born every minute", "Delivering babies"
3. Emergency responders	"Ambulance", "999 what's your emergency"
4. International emergency dramas	"Scrubs", "Grey's anatomy", "ER", "Chicago Med, "The good Doctor", "New Amsterdam"
5. Professional fictional characters	"Doctor Foster", "Patch Adam's, "The good doctor", "Village nurse in Heartbeat", "Mr tumble Bing Bluey", "Where the heart is", "Peak practice"
6. Primary care	"G.P behind closed doors", "Dr Ranj (CBeebies)"
7. Factual documentaries	Nonspecific documentaries on Covid and end of life, "BBC Documentaries", News reports, Social media accounts, "Teen pregnancy"
8. None identified	"I haven't seen any", "I don't know", " none", " Not much, it's said that they lose their skills", "Not many in community nursing to be honest most stuff are based in hospitals."



participant's knowledge pertaining to a specific role, this is not to be discouraged. Bloomfield et al (2015) declared that by showcasing the diverse roles, responsibilities and skills of primary health care nurses it can dispel myths that it is of lower status as a nursing genre or less skilled. It may have indicated that the identification of a nurse's role by the participants was task driven.

The frequencies for non-professional, other professional disciplines and non-specific nursing terms such as 'nursing response team' is concerning but does direct the potential for role education within the forthcoming curriculum. Education is essential to identify the roles and responsibilities of a variety of community nurses in order to improve the students' knowledge and association with the roles moving onward. Norman's (2015) qualitative interpretive study investigated views of young people of school age with regards to their perceptions of community nursing. Community roles were not perceived as 'real' nursing and most community nurse experiences were associated with older family members receiving interventions at home. This study indicates that education of community nursing roles needs broader dissemination than initially considered, to underpin knowledge prior to commencing nurse education.

Community and public health nursing roles are complex and require autonomy and leadership. There is a strong focus on safeguarding the wider public, promoting behavioural changes and sustaining therapeutic relationships. Health visitors, community paediatric nurses and school nurses are specific examples of these complex roles which had low recognition from the group. Such qualities needed for these roles may not be appreciated by pre-registration nurses at this stage in their education and as a result they may underestimate how diverse and multifaceted community nursing really is, (Van Lersel, et al., 2018).

“Do you see yourself working in the community upon qualification?”

This question gave the opportunity for definite answers of participants as to whether their career would steer them into working in a community environment. Student nurses are from a variety of different backgrounds at the start of their pre-registration journey and some individuals may be able to anticipate the rewards community nursing can offer. It is unclear whether students who do not visualise themselves in a community setting upon qualification are due to previous adverse experiences or personal desire; an area worthy of further more detailed exploration. Emeghebo's (2012) study reported that images of nurses are often focused on the public's image of the profession as opposed to nurse's opinions. She acknowledged that students are often astonished at the scope of the learning preparation required during their nurse education. This could indicate that of those students who were unsure or dismissive of community nursing roles on qualification, there is an opportunity to change their perceptions over the course of their programme. Expanding the pre-registration knowledge base from one that is increasingly secondary care focused will positively reinforce community nursing

*“What portrayals of community nursing can you recall that you have seen in*

*TV/film/programmes/book or other media sources?”*

The themes emerging from the study were that student nurses largely watched popularised TV programmes, many with an emergency context. Arguably this may influence their perception of nursing as a career. However, it is difficult to ascertain whether students will be inspired by entertainment that is glamorised; and whether media truly influences their decisions. According to Arias (2018) media can persuade individuals to accept what they are seeing as the social norm, but also can be an

informative learning vehicle. This relates to a systematic literature search of 522 papers, with 39 peer reviewed articles observed by Van Lersal et al (2016). They concluded that many student nurses start their career shaped by media representations. The social construct is that hospital based nursing is more advanced, with community nursing perceived to offer less technical skills and higher workloads. However, community nursing is a much larger proportion of the health service than secondary care, relying on autonomous, highly skilled practitioners (Harris et al 2013). Participants' answers from the study conducted encompassed all media portrayals not just those depicting community roles. Erroneous media perceptions of nurses can send out inaccurate messages by portraying professionals as reactive practitioners, which can be interpreted as superficial, stereotypical and damaging to the nursing profession, (McAllister et al, 2013).

International drama as a theme demonstrated that programmes were predominantly US hospital based. Participants commented that they could not identify any supporting media at all. Weaver et al., (2013) studied viewing habits of nursing students and discovered a potential cultural divide. Those who spoke English at home tended to watch less televised medical dramatisation than those who spoke English. This may prove significant as part of nursing recruitment processes and challenge assumptions that students are all exposed in the same way or have fixed ideas about nursing roles. Medical programmes could raise the profile of nursing and provide recruitment and pedagogical benefits if used correctly to widen the scope for nurse education, (Weaver et al, 2013).

It could be argued that the students interpretation of the question resulted in a focus on television programmes because of the low frequencies related to factual news and documentaries. The profile of nursing has been raised considerably within the media



as a consequence of the pandemic and recognition around the world has never been greater for registered nurses, (Stillwell, 2019). The WHO designated 2020 the year of the nurse and midwife on the bicentenary year of Florence Nightingale's birthday to demonstrate the awareness of growing a global nursing workforce, (WHO, 2020). This concentrated on all aspects of nursing and emphasised public health and community nursing roles as key areas for development, and something potential nursing students may have been exposed to. However, it is thought that drama as a medium can activate multiple senses, support reflection by the experience of others and enable the embodiment of new knowledge, (Arveklev, 2018). This may help to explain why television dramatisations are so memorable.

*“Which words do you think best described community nurses?”*

The words highlighted in the word cloud reflected similar responses between both groups of students prior to consolidation of the data. Predominant words describing community nurses associated personal qualities such as caring, compassion and kindness. Although, these are perceived as positive attributes to possess they are a distance apart from the dynamic, task driven and emergency focused qualities that emerged from the earlier themes. Timmins et al., (2018) study of student nurses discovered that student's disclose honesty and altruism as the most essential values in nursing practice. Consequently, this may have resulted in nursing practises that now focus on difficult task orientated activities with the absence of compassion. If this is true it does not bode well for recruitment into community nursing positions. Nonetheless, the focus of this study is on participants new to nurse education, thus

the potential to integrate, educate and celebrate the attributes required for community and public health roles is obtainable.

Participants' may have simply lacked insight into the level of care the community sector provides. Media influences discussed previously focused on emergency care delivery and the terms 'busy', 'challenging' and 'courageous' were some of the least used to describe community roles. McCann, Clark and Lu's (2010) longitudinal study constructed the view that the coveted enhanced technical nursing skills were influenced by depictions in the media and reinforced during clinical practice rotations. They observe that if a student's preference is acute care at the beginning of nurse education then it will typically remain unchanged, although it is plausible to change disparaging perceptions about other career choices. This provides further reassurance that by providing education and developing the nursing curricular, student nurses may opt for community nursing roles to generate a positive response to the workforce crisis. The nursing career development framework alluded to experiences as the most influential factors during clinical and educational placements, (Van Iersel et al, 2016). Therefore, by adopting a varied range of placement models across both public and voluntary agencies it can inform and inspire student nurses to consider a career long term in the community, (Cable, Dickson, and Morris, 2015). In addition to this, practice assessors and supervisors who are respectful, caring and empathetic are known to be positive role models and facilitate students who are more engaged and empowered, (Porteous and Machin, 2018). Therefore, the softer more caring attributes could be the qualities which attract students to community nursing roles.

## **Conclusion**

This study suggested that student nurses perceptions of community nursing roles are ambiguous and complex. The influence of the media is strong and has several guises; students' prior experiences and their personal opinions of the nursing profession all accumulate to inform individuals. From an international perspective, clinicians, academics and professional bodies must contemplate an alliance to urgently promote community nursing strategies. Engaging media resources can echo the value of these roles from recruitment and beyond. Universities have an opportunity to integrate community nursing and public health education into the pre-registration curriculum from conception. From the practitioner's perspective, strong leadership, role modelling and positive student experiences may help to nurture nursing students' interest in community roles. This will not only validate community nursing as a challenging and desirable professional pathway, but can enrich and diversify the skills required to construct a sustainable community nursing workforce.

## **Key points**

Community nursing recruitment is essential to sustain the workforce.

Student's understanding of community nursing roles are ambiguous.

Perceptions of nursing are influenced by media sources.

UK universities must develop educational plans to endorse community nursing.

## **Reflective Questions**

How would you describe community nursing roles?

Do you think media sources contribute to the perception of the nursing profession?

Should there be an equal split between community and hospital nursing placements for students?

How can we improve the uptake of community nurses?

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