Ward stars help create star wards: HCAs and APs working in mental health

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Launched in April 2014, Ward Stars was designed by Star Wards, a project of the social justice charity, Bright, dedicated to inpatient mental health wards. Star Wards felt it had to develop Ward Stars for two reasons. The first is that without healthcare assistants (HCAs), there wouldn't be any health care. The second was—at the time of its design—there wasn't anything like it for this extremely valuable group of workers. Ward Stars is therefore aimed at providing a structure for the recognition, training and professional development of HCAs. This article follows on from a previous article introducing Ward Stars (Higham, 2014) and gives an account of how HCAs in three organisations have used the structure to evidence their skills.

Star Wards is a project dedicated to improving inpatient mental healthcare for both patients and staff. It has a central belief that people who work on wards deserve recognition for their commitment. It also believes that staff should be given support to deliver the best care they can. And this doesn’t just mean the staff with recognised professional qualifications—it means all the staff.

Star Wards offers ideas and support to staff through web-based resources found on a number of specially designed websites. The websites www.starwards.org.uk and www.wardipedia.org are specifically designed to cater for inpatient staff and patients, while the website www.brief-encounters.org is for staff and 'Without healthcare assistants, there wouldn’t be any health care.'
patients in acute health care. In 2014, Star Wards launched the Ward Stars website, www.wardstars.org, which is specifically dedicated to supporting HCAs and other support staff who happen to work in mental health care.

Star Wards founder Marion Janner OBE worked alongside inpatient care project manager Nic Higham, who continues to work on wards as a healthcare support worker. Janner is pleased with how the initiative has been received. ‘We have designed Ward Stars to be a straightforward and satisfying structure for HCAs, and other support staff. Its aim is to recognise and evidence the incredible work done with very vulnerable patients. We give away the Ward Stars kit free through the website; the guidelines, ideas, evidence sheets and even the logo can be used within services. We are hearing that HCAs are finding it meaningful and rewarding, which is just fantastic. It felt essential that Nic was able to draw on his experience so as to develop and offer something really meaningful to other HCAs’.

Star Wards has heard from 3 organisations in particular who have adapted and implemented Ward Stars. These organisations are different, but have a backbone of committed and talented HCAs who, with others, have proactively taken Ward Stars to the heart of their services. This article is both about them and dedicated to them.

The three organisations are:

- NAViGO, a not-for-profit social enterprise (community interest company, or CIC) that emerged from the NHS, to run all local mental health and associated services in North East Lincolnshire (http://navigocare.co.uk)
- Mersey Care NHS Trust, a provider of specialist mental health services in North West England (www.merseycare.nhs.uk)
- St Andrew’s Nottingham and St Andrew’s Northampton, a leading UK charity providing specialist NHS care (www.standrewshealthcare.co.uk)

A previous article in this journal outlined the Ward Stars process (Higham, 2014). This is structured around seven ‘Stars’, each of which is focused on the main themes of therapeutic inpatient care, represented by the acronym ‘IMAGINE’ (see Box 1). HCAs undertaking the scheme can choose which areas of their work to focus on, to reflect on these and gain feedback from patients and colleagues. Support staff who successfully work their way through the seven Stars accumulate a portfolio of diverse aspects of their work.

The Stars provide a unique set of values, skills, and attributes that are very much in line with the Certificate of Fundamental Care proposed by the Cavendish Review (Cavendish, 2013). Janner says: ‘What is most significant is how services adapt the Ward Stars content in a meaningful and energising way, matching it to their service users and staff, so it makes a real difference. If something doesn’t resonate, adapt it and be inspired to introduce something that does. The last thing we want to do is impose stuff on wards, or tell people how to do their jobs – Nic repeatedly made this clear throughout its development.

Each of the seven Stars offers a few ideas based on what wards find effective, and all are grounded in the characteristics that service users feel are most important. How these are translated is up to HCAs. Nursing staff often feel overwhelmed by all the initiatives they have to do and the bureaucratic hoops that they have to jump through. Ward Stars is different. It’s refreshing, pragmatic and is rooted in humanness’ (Janner, 2014).

Fiona Cassells, clinical skills facilitator at Merseycare NHS, has developed a series of workshops for HCAs that are based predominantly on the Ward Stars material. The ‘Compassionate Care in Practice’ workshops are, in a variety of different ways, supporting Trust staff to work through the seven Stars. The title of the workshop was inspired by the Cavendish Review, which found that more training and development was needed for HCAs. Cassells personally visits the workshop participants in their settings to help them devise an implementation plan suitable for their ward or community area.

An important function of the workshops is to allow HCAs to share their stories. One exercise is the sharing of examples of compassionate care with each other. These accounts are written up and form material for the portfolios. As a new member of Merseycare NHS Trust staff, Cassells has been impressed with participants’ motivation to make things better for service users: ‘They have given me wonderful examples from their own practice as to what constitutes compassionate care; it has been inspiring for me to meet and teach them. HCAs are doing these activities already with their service users, and the completion of the portfolio is recognition of a job well done and very useful as evidence for their personal development plan/review. One of the strengths of the workshop has been mixing HCAs from different settings; it has helped HCAs learn from each other. What I am most pleased about is that those with smartphones now have the websites of Wardpedia.org and Wardstars.org in their favourites, which means inspiration is always at hand.’

In Northampton, the Adolescent Pathway service at St Andrew’s Hospital
has started to roll out Ward Stars in its own unique way. Modern matron Allie Carr says that it has greatly increased the confidence and empowerment of a particular HCA: ‘She has brought so much to the lives of the service users, both on her ward and on the other wards in the building. The ideas that she has generated [as a result of Ward Stars] have been shared, and the service users have all had opportunities to participate in her initiatives. The one the young people are most proud of is when they took part in the ‘Great Lowther Bake Off’ [WHAT IS LOWTHERR?] and sold their produce for charity. They aimed to make £200, but they actually made £334!’

Carr continued: ‘We have four more staff who are ready to start the Ward Stars programme and I am looking forward to many more great initiatives coming through, which will no doubt enhance both the lives of our service users and the experience, confidence and abilities of our HCAs.’

Meanwhile at St Andrew’s Nottingham base, the Band 4 HCAs and trainee assistant practitioners (TAPs) have met over several months to work through the Stars. This has manifested in various ways, including regular learning sets delivered by the advanced nurse practitioner and the hospital director.

The main aim of these sessions was to reflect on the care the cohort delivers and ensure resonance both with Ten Essential Shared Capabilities of the National Institute for Mental Health in England (Hope, 2004) (Box 2) and Compassion in Practice—usually referred to as the ‘6Cs’ (Department of Health (DH) and Chief Nursing Adviser, 2012) (Box 3).

Trainee assistant practitioner (TAP) Claire White found that Ward Stars helped her to experience herself as a valued member of the multidisciplinary team: ‘Sometimes, we HCAs have to shout a little louder than others to have our voice heard. But once it’s out there, it is generally listened to and often leads to productive discussions, and this is so important in making HCAs feel included. During my time working through the seven Stars, I became more ambitious and creative—along with the rest of the team—with the projects that I wanted to deliver to the patients. For example, we created an evolving “generosity tree”. Once a month, patients are nominated for some form of generosity and have their names engraved onto a wooden leaf that is then secured to the tree.’

Now that White has completed the Ward Stars programme, she will be working alongside the advanced nurse practitioner in delivering the programme to the next group. ‘Ward Stars is an excellent framework for HCAs to evidence their achievements and abilities,’ she says. ‘Completing the first star [Imagination] definitely helped me to really appreciate the programme, that it isn’t just about sitting for hours writing: it is about evidencing the work I do so that I can be recognised for my achievements. I was surprised that the recognition didn’t just come from staff, but also from the Star Wards Patient Sponsors whom we invite to give us feedback. I was surprised by how much that meant to me: hearing patients thank me and be positive about something.’

Ward Stars aims to:
- Be motivating and energising for HCAs
- Make explicit those aspects of HCAs’ work particularly valued by patients e.g. warm and empathetic personal qualities
- Contribute to meeting HCAs’ appetite and need for professional development
- Provide a helpful structure for professional development
- Publicly validate good practice
- Enhance the status and reputation of the HCA role
- Help demonstrate the skills and qualities included in the Certificate of Fundamental Care proposed by the Cavendish Review

Innovative imagination
Claire White mentioned the first star—the imagination star. ‘This star reflects HCAs’ capacity for innovation: the talented skill of making instant improvements on the go. HCAs have a diverse blend of talents and use creative thinking and approaches in their work continuously.

HCA Katy Sampson at community interest company NAViGO, who has also been awarded the Imagination Star, exemplifies the impact of the caring imagination and the skills and qualities this star embodies: ‘A service user was feeling agitated and was having thoughts to abscond from the unit. We were in the garden together, and she stated she would jump over the fence. At this point, I suggested she lay down on the trampoline and “cloud watch”. This was a distraction technique I thought of on the spot and with limited resources to...’
hand at the time. The service user tried this, after some reassurance from me. After only a short time, I could see her mood and mind were in a more relaxed state, and so I left her with her own space. She spent around one hour doing this and afterwards stated that she felt better and more settled.

Through the process of completing the evidence sheet for this Star, Sampson invited the service user to give some feedback that included that she found the activity both imaginative and relaxing. ‘[Ward Stars] has already lifted our confidence and made us feel recognised and appreciated for the hard work we all do,’ remarked Rob Burridge, an HCA who works with Sampson. ‘It is also so amazing to have Ellie Walsh, the ward manager there, encouraging everyone and giving us her full backing. She shows her faith in us and supports us all the way, and has even completed the Imagination Star herself.’

**Meaningful mindfulness**
The second Star is the Mindfulness one. This champions the skill of staying in the moment and cultivating more acceptance. The ‘mind’ part of mindfulness refers to caring with vigilance, as in saying ‘mind what you are doing’. The ‘fulness’ part refers to the entirety of what the current moment presents.

We could therefore conclude that mindfulness is the skill of attending with vigilance and care to what is presently sensed and experienced, as completely as possible. When ward staff give their full attention to service users, when they are truly listening, and noticing the various feelings and thoughts that are associated—theirs and the service users—they are being mindful.

HCA Jill Martin, also based at NAVIGO, shares how she frequently uses mindfulness on both a planned and spontaneous basis: ‘Mindfulness activities happen all the time on the lodges where I work, and I often get involved with them. Sometimes, the mindfulness activities are planned and others just happen naturally. We are very lucky to have an assistant psychologist, who five times a week runs a psychology group that involves mindfulness. I am involved in these groups, as it is part of my job role to encourage and support patients and to also join in the groups.

‘Activities that I have delivered or been involved with over the years include: relaxation; going for a walk around the grounds; strolls through the woods, or trips up to Cleethorpes. I find these activities help to soothe service users, in that they help to reduce stress and anxiety and help them focus on the present moment.’

Another skill that can work hand-in-hand with mindfulness is mentalising. Mentalising is the capacity to be aware of one’s thoughts and feelings and particularly to recognise that the other person’s experience is different from our own. Both mindfulness and mentalising are words that imply being aware of our present-moment experience—as well as that of other people. As Martin explains: ‘I feel the most meaningful mindful activity I deliver is one-to-one support. For example, I recently spent some time with a service user whose mother had passed away some time ago and who was still really struggling with her loss. I was mindful in my approach and was empathic with her. While I didn’t disclose it, my father had passed away some years ago, and I was in touch with my feelings about this subject as well, but I could tell the difference between hers and mine, and that felt important. I helped her to get in touch with the here and now and to help her feel more empowered.’

Marion Janner OBE: ‘If something doesn’t resonate, adapt it and be inspired to introduce something that does.’
When relationships are based on mindfulness they become deeper and more meaningful and have the potential to be a ground for personal transformation.

**Activities and feeling good**

Providing activities on wards is a cornerstone of the Star Wards ethos. Nowadays, many different types of groups and therapeutic activity can be seen on mental health wards.

The Activities Star is all about motivating and encouraging patients and staff towards constructive and purposeful activity. As HCA Angie Waters at NAViGo explains: ‘I like to plan and implement activities on the ward, as I find that most service users enjoy engaging in some sort of activity—whether it’s a quiz, a singalong or a craft group.

‘For the patient, being on a ward 24 hours a day can be a boring time; activities can help improve a person’s mood and give them a feeling of accomplishment. Activities also allow an important and relaxed time for service users and staff to engage in conversation, whether it’s a light-hearted chat, or a deeper talk about how they are doing.’

A full programme of daily activities helps create a calmer environment. Such a programme requires HCAs to be risk-aware, stay organised and be resourceful, and the Activities Star reflects these skills.

Waters gave an example of the power of creativity and resourcefulness: ‘While escorting a service user on leave, we went into a “shabby chic” shop. I noticed some rag wreaths that were very pretty and attractive, but very expensive to buy. I researched on the Internet for the wire frames that were the basis of the wreaths and placed an order. Although I had looked closely at the wreaths in the shop, I researched on the internet on YouTube how to make them, and they looked easy to make. To minimise costs, I used scraps of materials torn into strips and no real skills are required other than to tie a knot. It was a low-risk activity that was suitable for all to engage in and appealed to a wide range of people.

‘This sort of activity can also inspire innovative ideas in service users. Waters continues: ‘One service user suggested making Christmas wreaths to sell for charity at the Christmas fair. They also discussed making them as a hobby at home, as it was simple and easy to gather the materials.’

While typical activities of daily living can often seem mundane, they often become more significant and restorative for inpatients. This is illustrated in the feedback from a service user about Karen Goldstein, an HCA at Mersey Care NHS Trust: ‘Went to the shops twice with Karen. Very nice lady. Easy to talk to. Not only took me to the shop, but took me the long way round the hospital grounds. Very nice walk. Kept me off the ward that little bit longer. Like to thank her for that.’

BJHCA

In Part 2 of his article, Nic Higham will look at the remaining four Stars—Generosity, Involvement, Neighbours and Empathy.

**References**


