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Clinical Education and Training Queensland

Clinical Education and Training for Health Assistants: A systematic review to support an external evaluation of clinical education and training for allied health assistants

Report to Queensland Health

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Contents

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY 7
1. INTRODUCTION 9
2. REVIEW OBJECTIVES 10
3. BACKGROUND TO THE REVIEW 11
4. REVIEW METHODS 13
Inclusion Criteria 13
Search strategy 14
Assessment of methodological quality 15
Data collection 15
Data synthesis 16
Description of included studies 16
5. SYSTEMATIC REVIEW FINDINGS RELATED TO QUESTION 1: EFFECTIVE/APPROPRIATE STRATEGIES TO INCREASE/PROMOTE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF HEALTH ASSISTANTS IN VOCATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS 18
6. SYSTEMATIC REVIEW FINDINGS RELATED TO QUESTION 2: EFFECTIVE/APPROPRIATE STRATEGIES TO ESTABLISH THE HEALTH ASSISTANT ROLE AS A RECOGNISED DELEGATED CLINICAL ROLE AND PROMOTE THEIR INCLUSION IN MODELS OF CARE 19
Methodological quality 23
Quantitative results 24
Qualitative results 24
Meta-Synthesis of the findings extracted from included studies 25
Discussion 28
Recommendations for practice 29
7. SYSTEMATIC REVIEW FINDINGS RELATED TO QUESTION 3: EFFECTIVE/APPROPRIATE STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE CONSISTENCY AND STANDARDISATION OF VOCATIONAL TRAINING DELIVERED TO HEALTH ASSISTANTS 30
Quantitative results 30
Discussion 31
Recommendations for practice 31
8. SYSTEMATIC REVIEW FINDINGS RELATED TO QUESTION 4: EFFECTIVE/APPROPRIATE STRATEGIES TO ADAPT VOCATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS TO LOCAL CONTEXT IN HEALTHCARE 31
9. SYSTEMATIC REVIEW FINDINGS RELATED TO QUESTION 5: EFFECTIVE/APPROPRIATE STRATEGIES TO INCREASE THE RELEVANCE AND UNDERSTANDING OF VOCATIONAL TRAINING AMONGST ALLIED HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AND HEALTH ASSISTANTS 32
Quantitative results 32
Discussion 32
Recommendations for practice 32

10. LITERATURE REVIEW ON QUESTION 1: EFFECTIVE/APPROPRIATE STRATEGIES TO INCREASE/PROMOTE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF HEALTH ASSISTANTS IN VOCATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS 34

Introduction 34

Motivators and barriers 34

Finances 34

Occupational therapy 35

Indigenous health workers 35

Programs for training 35

Recruitment 36

Retention 36

Conclusion 37

Recommendations for practice 37

11. LITERATURE REVIEW ON QUESTION 2: EFFECTIVE/APPROPRIATE STRATEGIES TO ESTABLISH THE HEALTH ASSISTANT ROLE AS A RECOGNISED DELEGATED CLINICAL ROLE AND PROMOTE THEIR INCLUSION IN MODELS OF CARE 38

The need for assistants 38

Barriers to incorporation in models of care 39

Role of assistants 39

Physiotherapy assistants 39
Occupational therapy assistants 40
General practice 40
Nursing 40
Lay health advisors 40
Podiatry 41
Audiology 41
Midwifery 41
Radiography 41
Intensive care 41
Speech pathology 42
Operating room 42
Multidisciplinary support 42

Promoting inclusion in models of care 42

Nursing 42
Dentistry 44
Physiotherapy 44
Occupational therapy 44
Speech language therapy 44

Delegation 45

Nursing 45
Physiotherapy 45

Conclusion 46

Recommendations for practice 46

12. LITERATURE REVIEW ON QUESTION 3: EFFECTIVE/APPROPRIATE STRATEGIES TO PROMOTE CONSISTENCY AND STANDARDISATION OF VOCATIONAL TRAINING DELIVERED TO HEALTH ASSISTANTS 47

The need to standardise **47**
Pharmacy 47
Speech and language pathology 47
Physiotherapy 47
Occupational therapy 48
Strategies to maintain consistency **48**
Nursing 48
Rehabilitation 48
Midwifery 49
Speech and language pathology 49
Conclusion **49**
Recommendations for practice **49**
13. LITERATURE REVIEW ON QUESTION 4: EFFECTIVE/APPROPRIATE STRATEGIES TO ADAPT VOCATIONAL TRAINING PROGRAMS TO LOCAL CONTEXTS IN HEALTHCARE **50**
International examples **50**
Australian examples **51**
Conclusion **52**
Recommendations for practice **52**
14. LITERATURE REVIEW ON QUESTION 5: EFFECTIVE/APPROPRIATE STRATEGIES TO INCREASE THE RELEVANCE AND UNDERSTANDING OF VOCATIONAL TRAINING AMONGST ALLIED HEALTH PROFESSIONALS AND HEALTH ASSISTANTS **53**
Strategies **53**
Conclusion **54**
Recommendations for practice **55**
15. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS **56**
Question 1: What are effective/appropriate strategies to increase/promote recruitment and retention of HAs in vocational training programs? **56**
Recommendations for practice 56
Question 2: What are effective/appropriate strategies to establish the HA role as a recognised delegated clinical role and promote their inclusion in models of care? **57**
Recommendations for practice 57
Question 3: What are effective/appropriate strategies to promote consistency and standardisation of vocational training delivered to HAs? **58**
Recommendation for practice 58
Question 4: What are effective/appropriate strategies to adapt vocational training programs to local context in healthcare? **58**
Recommendations for practice 58
Question 5: What are effective/appropriate strategies to increase the relevance and understanding of vocational training amongst allied health professionals and HAs? **58**
Recommendations for practice 58
16. REFERENCES **59**
17. APPENDICES **66**
Appendix 1: Initial search in Medline using Ovid **66**
Appendix 2: Critical Appraisal Instruments **69**

JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Experimental Studies 69
JBI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Descriptive/ Case Series 70
JBI QARI Critical Appraisal Checklist for Interpretive & Critical Research 71
Appendix 3: Data Extraction Instruments 72
JBI data extraction form for experimental/observational studies 72
JBI QARI Data Extraction Form for Interpretive & Critical Research 74
Appendix 4: Summary of quantitative studies included in Question 2 76
Appendix 5: Summary of qualitative studies included in Question 2 79
Appendix 6: JBI Levels of Evidence and Grades of Recommendation 99
Appendix 7: Summary of quantitative studies in Question 3 101
Appendix 8: Summary of quantitative studies in Question 5 102

Executive Summary

Recent healthcare redesign in Australia has necessarily been directed at providing more equitable, accessible, efficient and effective patient care. In alignment with these aims, allied health assistants have increasingly been introduced into models of care across a range of professions. Concomitant with the increase of assistants in the workplace has been the national introduction and endorsement of vocational training programs for allied health assistants.

A review of the literature was commissioned by Queensland Health to inform current and future program development in relation to the education and training of allied health assistants. In particular, the review planned to address the following questions:

1. What are effective/appropriate strategies to increase/promote recruitment and retention of health assistants in vocational training programs?
2. What are effective/appropriate strategies to establish the health assistant role as a recognised delegated clinical role and promote their inclusion in models of care?
3. What are effective/appropriate strategies to promote consistency and standardisation of vocational training delivered to health assistants
4. What are effective/appropriate strategies to adapt vocational training programs to local context in healthcare?
5. What are effective/appropriate strategies to increase the relevance and understanding of vocational training amongst allied health professionals and health assistants?

For each question, a systematic review was conducted, which included a structured search of the literature over a range of databases and critical appraisal of studies that met the inclusion criteria. Due to the lack of high methodological quality research studies, a narrative literature review was also conducted to inform each question.

In total, 18 studies were included in the systematic component of this review. The majority of these studies related to question 2. No studies were identified for inclusion in questions 1 or 4. Two studies were included in question 3, and 1 included in question 5. A qualitative meta-synthesis was able to be conducted for question 2.

For question 1, there was some evidence, albeit limited, regarding motivations and barriers to the uptake of training programs identified in the literature review component. Common barriers to recruitment were noted, which included prohibitive costs of training, lack of time, issues of travelling and distance and a lack of recognition of training. Common barriers to retaining students included perceived overly 'academic' course content and the fast pace of training. Motivating factors for both undertaking and persevering with training included the desire to progress professionally, guarantee of employment following training, introduction of key skills from the beginning of the program, the ability to earn and learn, courses that offered flexible times and further options to progress to professional training. Although the information presented did not discuss strategies as such, it can be used to inform strategies to increase/promote recruitment and retention of health assistants in vocational training programs.

For question 2, a number of studies were included in both the systematic review and the literature review components of this project. In the systematic review, strategies to promote assistant inclusion in models of care included creation of empowered work teams, implementing models of collaborative learning, analysing and redesigning the assistant role and use of educational courses/workshops. Analysis of the included qualitative studies resulted in four meta-synthesised findings. These meta-syntheses addressed the relationship between assistants and professionals, what affects the assistant's role and how it is perceived, training programs for assistants and professionals, and accountability and supervision concerns. The literature review identified other issues of importance, such as delegation, barriers to inclusion, and educational needs of assistants and professionals. Together, these findings can be used to provide guidance when educating assistants and health professionals, and when preparing to incorporate assistants in models of care.

For question 3, there was widespread agreement regarding the need to promote consistency and standardisation of vocational training delivered to health assistants. Despite this, there was a lack of literature focusing specifically on strategies to achieve consistent or standardised training. Literature pertinent to the question highlighted different organisations creating guidelines, standards and accreditation processes for assistant training courses, and the two studies included in the systematic review expounded on how standards could be developed and tested, or generated from practice. These findings may be used to provide guidance when conducting strategies to promote consistency and standardisation of vocational training for health assistants.

For question 4, there was limited evidence supporting the need for appropriate and effective strategies to adapt vocational training programs to local contexts in healthcare. Review of the minimal literature available related to this question suggests that training does need to be contextualised at times for local contexts, and this may need to take into account (depending on the setting) population spread and rural health, cultural issues, developing countries, and local healthcare shortages.

For question 5, different strategies or points relating to increasing the relevance of vocational training amongst allied health professionals and assistants were identified in the literature. These included use of adult learning techniques, ensuring relevance to future work, surveying entry level practice and designing training based on this, collaborative learning, and continuing professional development. The one study included in the systematic review highlighted components of a training program that were either well received or not. These findings may be able to provide guidance to increase the relevance and understanding of vocational training amongst allied health professionals and assistants.

Amongst the Australian and international literature, there is currently a paucity of evidence regarding strategies to promote and retain health assistant students in vocational education and training programs and to maximise their potential in the assistant role across the health workforce. This lack of research is particularly noticeable when considering allied health assistants specifically, and much of the research literature that is directly relevant to these issues is of low methodological quality. However, pertinent information was identified that informed the review questions and that can provide insight for future developments in education and training of allied health assistants within Australia.

1. Introduction

Clinical Education and Training Queensland (ClinEdQ) identified a need for a comprehensive review of the Australian and International literature to inform current and future program development in relation to the education and training of allied health assistants undertaken with partnering Technical and Further Education institutions (TAFE). This monograph documents the findings of this review undertaken for Queensland Health by the Joanna Briggs Institute.

2. Review objectives

This review aimed to both identify and evaluate Australian and international strategies implemented to improve multiple facets of clinical education and training for health assistants (HA) in allied health and other health disciplines. To this end, in line with the outcomes sought by the Clinical Education and Training for Allied Health Assistants in Queensland Health Project, this review addressed the following questions:

- Question 1: What are effective/appropriate strategies to increase/promote recruitment and retention of HAs in vocational training programs?
- Question 2: What are effective/appropriate strategies to establish the HA role as a recognised delegated clinical role and promote their inclusion in models of care?
- Question 3: What are effective/appropriate strategies to promote consistency and standardisation of vocational training delivered to HAs?
- Question 4: What are effective/appropriate strategies to adapt vocational training programs to local context in healthcare?
- Question 5: What are effective/appropriate strategies to increase the relevance and understanding of vocational training amongst allied health professionals and HAs?

3. Background to the review

Assistants have been utilised for many years worldwide in healthcare as a means to ensure the provision of adequate and efficient healthcare in the midst of increased pressures on health services. This is because of a number of factors including:

- the increased prevalence of people presenting with chronic or complex disease
- ageing of the population
- challenges in the recruitment and retention of qualified staff
- increased expectations of health care personnel and
- expectations from patients that they be actively involved in their care.[1-3]

It is strongly argued across all sectors of healthcare that health assistants are able to provide effective care, [4, 5] and there are moves to change models of care to ensure that tasks are carried out by staff with the right level of skill, experience and competency.[6] There has been a long history of assistants providing care in nursing, and the role of assistants is seen as essential in the modern healthcare system, even being described as the backbone of the health system.[3,7] This assistant level of worker has spread amongst the health professions, and there now exist a significant number of support workers for the varied health disciplines.[8]

Health assistants can be defined as those who provide assistance and support to health professionals by whom they are directly or indirectly supervised. Health assistants can have varied roles, and may work within professions or across them. The nomenclature for allied health assistants is diverse,[9] and includes aides, support workers, support personnel, attendants, paraprofessionals, or unlicensed staff.[10] For this review, health assistants will be the generic term used to describe this role, allied health assistants will be used when it relates particularly to an allied health profession. Nursing assistants will be the term used when relating specifically to nursing.

In Australia and internationally, the recruitment and retention of allied health professionals including but not limited to physiotherapists, occupational therapists and speech therapists is increasingly challenging because of demographic changes in the number of appropriately qualified applicants to professional preparation programs and increases in workforce mobility.[1, 11] The development of the allied health assistant role is one strategy to alleviate the shortage of qualified health professionals, a feature of most modern health systems in advanced economies.[1, 12] This has led to role redesign where allied health assistants may be delegated direct patient care activities, allowing health professionals to spend more time focused on complex patient care activities.[1, 13]

Although assistants have been utilised in healthcare for some time now, and despite the widely recognised need for them, the role they play and relationships between traditional health professionals and support workers is still seen as ill defined,[13, 14] and at times, controversial.[14, 15] A systematic review by Lizarondo et al. (2010)[1] was conducted to determine the level of evidence surrounding the roles and responsibilities of allied health assistants, in addition to their utilisation and the barriers to their use in healthcare settings. The authors included ten studies in their review, and found that allied health assistants perform a range of both clinical and non-clinical duties. The role of assistants varied significantly in the literature. Some of the clinical duties performed by allied health assistants included patient education, assisting allied health personnel and assisting with mobility and gait of the patient.[1] Non-clinical duties reported included administrative duties, preparation/maintenance of environments, recording of data and housekeeping.[1] The authors also found benefits resulting from the use of allied health assistants, including improved outcomes, additional time for allied health personnel, increased patient satisfaction and the provision of higher level services. However, barriers to their introduction were also identified, including lack of clarity regarding the role of allied health assistants, confusion regarding tasks, and difficulties of health professionals letting go of their work.[1] To ensure efficiency, productivity and cost containment, a team approach is essential, which requires assistants and health professional to work in collaborative models of care.[13]

The increased number of assistants has given rise to a number of strategies to accommodate this level of worker within the healthcare team, and to maximise their potential to improve patient care. Wide variations in their level of training are reported in the literature, ranging from short in service training sessions, to on the job training, vocational programs and degree programs. In addition, programs designed to support, retain and increase competencies have varied effects.[7, 11, 13.] Within Australia, formal training is neither mandatory nor often required of allied health assistants and they may have either minimal or no experience, or plenty of experience but with no formal qualifications receiving only 'on the job' training from the supervising health professional.[9, 14, 16]

However, formal qualifications for allied health assistants are available through the vocational education and training sector, and are based on the achievement of competencies, delivered via registered training organisations such as Technical and Further Education (TAFE) institutions, which offer a Certificate III and Certificate IV in Allied Health Assistance. These VET qualifications in Australia have been specifically developed to comply with the National Qualifications Framework[17] and are delivered by registered training organisations (RTOs). In addition, recent government strategies targeted towards addressing workforce needs, skills shortages and productivity[9] have seen an increased investment and availability of places within these programs. The Australian Physiotherapy Council[10] recommend that physiotherapy assistants are trained at 'Certificate IV level or equivalent training in the vocational education and training sector,[10] whilst physiotherapy aides should be trained 'at Certificate III level in the vocational education and training sector, or equivalent qualifications and workplace experience.[10]

It has been acknowledged that there is a need for consistency in the training and education of persons at the assistant level, and also a need to evaluate the benefits of models of care utilising assistants.[14] Despite a growing body of literature in this area, no comprehensive review has been identified in searches of the bibliographic databases. Therefore, identifying and synthesising the existing research evidence will inform policy and practice related to building an effective allied health workforce that includes allied health assistants as an integral part of the healthcare team.

4. Review methods

This project consisted of a systematic review which was conducted according to the methods outlined in the Joanna Briggs Institute Reviewer's Manual.[18] To address issues that arose from papers not included in the systematic component of this review, a non-systematic literature review was also carried out and is presented following the systematic component of this review.

Inclusion Criteria

Occupational groups considered

This review considered allied health assistants or assistants in other health disciplines, including but not limited to physiotherapy assistants, occupational therapy assistants, podiatry assistants, speech pathologist assistants, dietician assistants, dental assistants and nursing assistants. These health assistants may or may not have undertaken formal training, or have received formal qualifications.

Due to the expected lack of literature focusing on strategies targeting only allied health assistants, strategies addressing assistants from other professions, such as nursing, were also included. Some components of this review also included allied health professionals and professionals from other health disciplines, particularly the question surrounding effective/appropriate strategies to increase the relevance and understanding of vocational training amongst allied health professionals and allied health assistants. Literature that focused exclusively on physician's assistants was excluded as these roles are well developed and highly regulated and so are quite different from allied health assistants in Australia.

Types of intervention

This review considered studies that included interventions to improve clinical education and training for health assistants. This included strategies to promote recruitment and retention, differing education frameworks, pathways and models, strategies to promote consistency/standardisation of vocational training, strategies to adapt vocational training programs, and strategies to increase the relevance and understanding of vocational training amongst allied health professionals and health assistants.

The different educational frameworks, pathways and models included in the review were:

- standardised training and/or assessment for health assistants
- training that begins immediately on the job
- formal and informal training
- design and/or definition of the health assistant role as a recognised delegated clinical role
- specific inclusion of the health assistant role in models of care and clinical pathways
- modifying training to allow qualifications in multiple streams
- contextualising training program/materials and
- implementing resources to support clinical supervisors and allied health professionals.

Types of outcomes

Outcomes for this review included factors related to health assistants and allied health professionals training and practice. These included, but were not limited to:

- recruitment rates of health assistants into vocational training programs
- retention rates of health assistants in vocational training programs
- health assistant inclusion in models of care
- standardised training programs for health assistants and
- increased relevance/understanding of vocational training amongst health assistants and allied health professionals.

Types of studies

The effectiveness component of the review considered any randomised controlled trials (RCT). In the absence of RCTs other research designs, such as non-randomised controlled trials, cohort studies, cross-sectional and before and after studies, were considered for inclusion in a narrative summary.

The appropriateness (qualitative) component of this review considered interpretive study designs that focused on qualitative data including, but not limited to, designs such as phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography, action research and feminist research. Cross-sectional studies and surveys were also considered in this component. Only studies published in English were included.

As was envisaged, much of the literature informing this topic took the form of expert opinion as opposed to research. In an effort to comprehensively cover the issues involved, this literature was reviewed as a subsection of this report.

Search strategy

The search strategy aimed to find both published and unpublished studies. A three-step search strategy was utilised in each component of this review. An initial limited search of MEDLINE and CINAHL was undertaken followed by analysis of the text words contained in the title and abstract, and of the index terms used to describe the article. A second search using all identified keywords and index terms was undertaken across all included databases. Thirdly, the reference lists of all identified reports and articles were searched for additional studies.

The databases searched included:

- Medline
- Cochrane Library
- JBI Library of Systematic Reviews
- AMED
- CINAHL
- EMBASE
- PEDRO
- OTseeker
- Web of Science
- ERIC
- BEME.

The search for unpublished studies included:

- Mednar
- Google Scholar
- Current Contents
- Dissertation Abstracts (digital dissertations).

Initial keywords used were:

Allied health assistants, support workers, assistants in nursing, physiotherapy assistants, health assistants, helpers, nurse aides, competency, standardised assessment, education promotion, student retention, enrolment, vocation, vocational, training, clinical training, clinical learning, local context, contextual, applied learning, training, instruction, teaching, curriculum, curricula, role redesign, models of care.

Additionally, a hand search of two relevant journals (Journal of Allied Health, Internet Journal of Allied Health Sciences and Practice) was also conducted, as these were highlighted as journals of particular interest.

Detailed Search Strategy:

The search strategy used in Medline is detailed in Appendix 1.

Applicable MeSH headings used were Nurses' Aides, Dental Assistants, Pharmacists' aides, Community health aides and the logic grid below was utilised in the search.

Allied health	Aide	Curricula
Audiologist	Assistant	Curriculum
Audiology	Assistants in nursing	Education
Chiropodist	Community health aides	Enrolment
Dentist	Delegation	Instruction
Dentistry	Dental assistants	Learning
Dietetics	Health worker	Model of care
Dietician	Helper	Pathway
Nurse	Nurses' aide	Role development
Nursing	Support worker	Role redesign
Nutritionist		Teaching
Occupational therapist		Training
Occupational Therapy		Vocation
Orthotists		
Pharmacists		
Pharmacy		
Physical therapist		
Physical therapy		
Physiotherapist		
Physiotherapy		
Podiatrist		
Podiatry		
Prosthetist		
Radiation therapy		
Radiographer		
Speech pathologist		
Speech pathology		

Assessment of methodological quality

Qualitative and quantitative papers selected for retrieval were assessed by two independent reviewers for methodological quality prior to inclusion in the review using standardised critical appraisal instruments from the Joanna Briggs Institute (Qualitative Assessment and Review Instrument [JBI-QARI] and Meta Analysis of Statistics Assessment and Review Instrument [JBI-MAStARI]) (Appendix 2). No disagreements arose between the reviewers, but if they did, they were to be resolved through discussion, or with a third reviewer.

Data collection

Qualitative data was extracted from papers included in the review using the standardised data extraction tool from the Joanna Briggs Institute Qualitative Assessment and Review Instrument JBI-QARI (Appendix 3). Quantitative data was extracted from papers included in the review using the standardised data extraction tool from JBI-MAStARI (Appendix 3). The data extracted included specific details about the interventions, populations, study methods and outcomes of significance to the review question and specific objectives.

Data synthesis

Qualitative research findings were, where possible, pooled using the Qualitative Assessment and Review Instrument (JBI-QARI). This involved the aggregation or synthesis of findings to generate a set of statements that represent that aggregation, through assembling the findings (Level 1 findings) rated according to their quality, and categorising these findings on the basis of similarity in meaning (Level 2 findings). These categories were then subjected to a meta-synthesis in order to produce a single comprehensive set of synthesised findings (Level 3 findings) that can be used as a basis for evidence-based practice.[18]

Included papers were read and re-read multiple times closely before findings were extracted. Supporting text for each finding was also extracted, and each finding was assigned a level of credibility according to the QARI analytical module. These levels are:[18]

1. Unequivocal (U) – relates to evidence beyond reasonable doubt which may include findings that are matter of fact, directly reported/observed and not open to challenge.
2. Credible (C) – those that are, albeit interpretations, plausible in light of data and theoretical framework. They can be logically inferred from the data. Because the findings are interpretive they can be challenged.
3. Not Supported (NS) – when 1 or 2 does not apply and when most notably findings are not supported by the data.

Due to the heterogeneity of included quantitative studies, and the differences in reporting, study design, outcomes and interventions, meta-analysis was not performed. As statistical pooling was not possible, the findings are presented in narrative form.

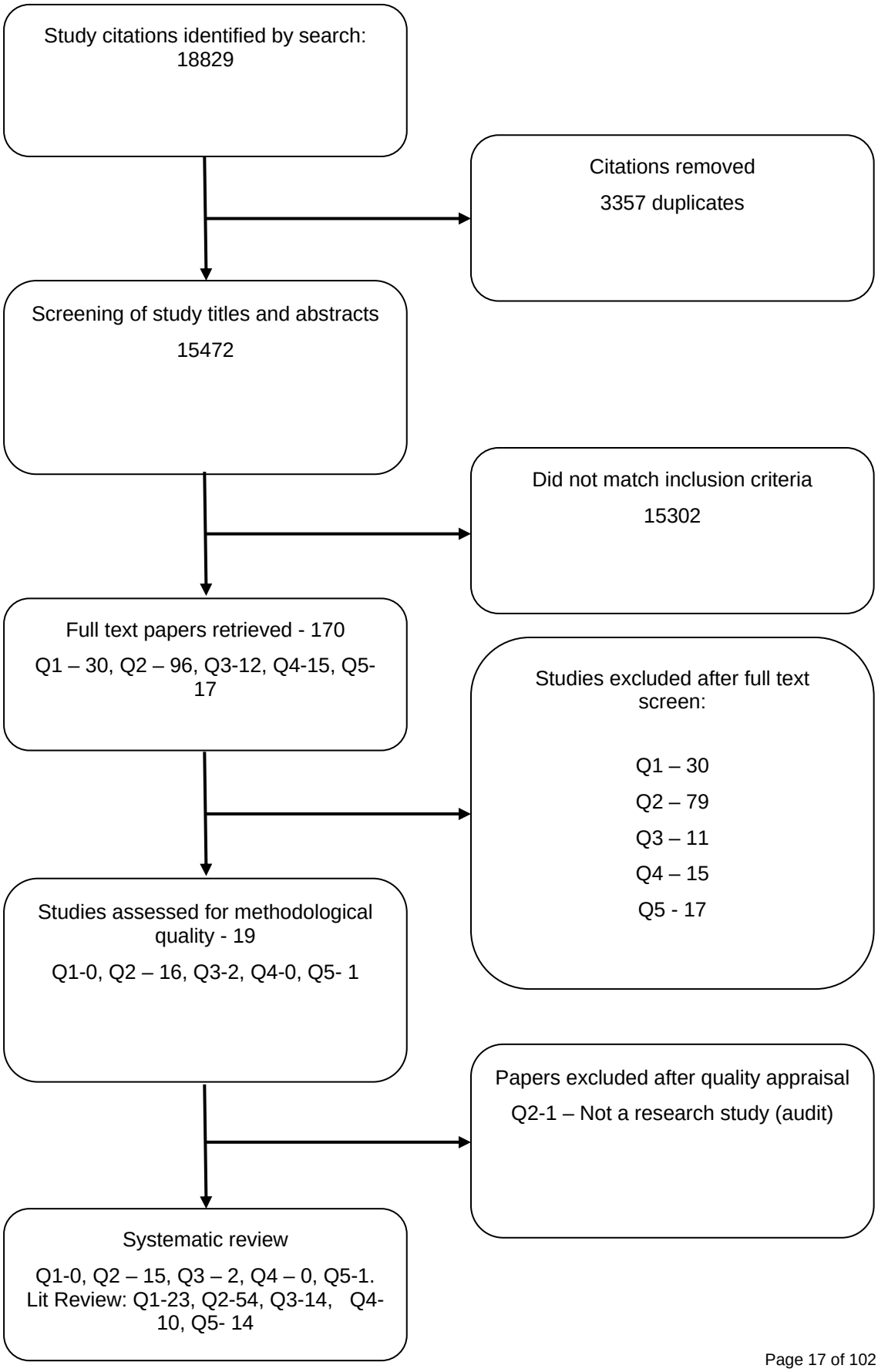
Description of included studies

During the period 14th of April to 13th of May 2011, the structured search strategy was implemented as previously described using a range of databases. Results of the searches were combined into an Endnote library for further screening. All results were screened by two authors to determine the relevance based on the study title and abstract. Results of this process are presented in Figure 1.

Following a scan of the literature in Endnote, there were only a small number of research studies relating to each of the five questions of this review, with the majority of the literature consisting of expert opinion articles or commentaries. All the articles were screened for inclusion based on their study titles and abstracts.

In total, 18 studies were included in the systematic component of this review. The majority of these studies were related to question 2. No studies were identified for inclusion in questions 1 or 4. Two studies were included in question 3, and 1 included in question 5. One study that was initially deemed for inclusion was excluded following critical appraisal, as it was not a research study. The studies are described in more detail under each question.

Figure 1. Flow diagram detailing results of literature search, study selection and assessment of methodological quality.



5. Systematic Review Findings related to Question 1: Effective/appropriate strategies to increase/promote recruitment and retention of health assistants in vocational training programs

During the initial search, a number of studies were identified as potentially relevant to this question. However, after retrieving the full text, no studies met the inclusion criteria, and so a narrative summary was produced. A discussion surrounding this question is presented in the narrative literature review section of this report.

6. Systematic Review Findings related to Question 2: Effective/appropriate strategies to establish the health assistant role as a recognised delegated clinical role and promote their inclusion in models of care

During the search related to this question, a substantial amount of literature was deemed as potentially relevant to the question. After retrieving full text versions of the studies, 15 were deemed appropriate for inclusion in this systematic review. One study that was critically appraised was not deemed suitable for inclusion as it was an audit.[19] The studies were of varied design: Table 1 describes the included qualitative studies, and Table 2 describes the quantitative studies. None of the qualitative studies stated the use of a specific qualitative methodology (such as grounded theory, phenomenology, etc). The last column in Table 1 states whether or not the study presented illustrations, which were defined as direct quotes from study participants.

Table 1: Qualitative studies included

Study	Methods	Participants	Strategy	Results	Illustrations
Fronek et al. 2009[20]	Questionnaire with open-ended questions	109 interdisciplinary practitioners including allied health professionals such as dieticians and speech therapists	Inter-professional training	A combination of intensive training in professional boundaries and opportunities for ongoing professional development are important for all health practitioners	Good illustrations
Hancock et al. 2005[21]	Semi-structured interviews	Health care assistants and patients	Health care assistants development programme	Health care assistants development programme positively influenced the role of the health care assistants; there was a need to invest more into preparation for the restructuring of roles	Low quality illustrations
Hauxwell 2002[22]	Structured interviews	Operating department assistants and nurses	Participants' perspective on teaching, learning, and safe practice as well as working relationships	Implementation of the national vocational qualification has brought an improvement in the relationship between the two major non-medical staff groups in the two units involved in the study	Good illustrations
Jelley et al. 2010[13]	Journals; pre- and post-placement interviews	Three third-year physiotherapy students, three second-year physiotherapy assistance students and three physiotherapists as clinical instructors	A paired 5-week clinical placement	The shared model of learning in clinical placements gave the students involved an effective means to improve competencies in collaborative practice	Good illustrations

Johnson et al. 2004[23]	Structured non-participant observation; semi-structured interviews;	Senior health care support workers	Evaluation of the introduction of support workers with advanced skills into intensive care units	There remains a great need to clarify the nature and lines of accountability for the work done	Good illustrations
Jung et al. 2008[24]	Student reflective journals; students post-placement focus group discussion; student questionnaire; tutors reflective journals; preceptors post-placement focus group	Seven pairs of occupational therapy students and occupation therapy assistants, tutors and student preceptors	Combined collaborative fieldwork placement	Intra-professional learning experiences prior to graduation can help prepare occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistant students for future collaborative practice	Good illustrations
Jung et al. 2002[25]	Journals kept by the students throughout the placement; the students also completed a post placement questionnaire	Eight senior occupational therapy students and eight senior occupational therapy assistant students	Learning together in fieldwork settings	It is essential that students are prepared to have the knowledge, skills and professional attitudes to enter into the partnership relationship	Good illustrations
Nancarrow et al 2005[26]	Focus group interviews	Occupational therapy service users and providers of North Staffordshire Combined Healthcare NHS Trust	Introduction and evaluation of an occupational therapy assistant practitioner	There is a need to clarify career structures and ensure that appropriate training is available to support staff in their new roles	Good illustrations

Plack et al. 2006[15]	Focus groups semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions	34 first year physical therapy students and 21 second year physical therapy assistant students. Also included for comparison were 24 second and 22 third year physical therapy assistants, who did not partake in the same collaborative course with assistants as the first year students. Two focus groups consisting of 6 assistants and 5 physical therapists respectively	Collaborative learning instructional model	The instructional model described is effective in teaching the physical therapy assistant role and provides a mechanism to foster the development of the preferred relationship between physical therapist and assistants.	Good illustrations
Potter et al. 2004[27]	Focus sessions (interviews)	13 registered nurses; 9 unlicensed assistive personnel	Characteristics of registered nurse and unlicensed assistive personnel working relationships and the care delivery practices that influence those relationships	Successful registered nurse and unlicensed assistive personnel partnering allows staff to share a common patient care focus	Good illustrations

Table 2: Quantitative studies included

Study	Methods	Participants	Intervention A	Intervention B	Notes
Bergin 2009[28]	Pilot before and after study	Podiatry assistant and Podiatrist	Introduction of a podiatry assistant	No comparison group	The study displays how a podiatry assistant can be incorporated into models of care with positive outcomes.
Chow et al. 2010[29]	Before and after survey	Nursing staff	Pre-introduction of assistants.	Post-introduction of assistants.	This study describes the introduction of a new model of care and staff reactions to it, which can help inform future projects.
Clayworth1997[30]	Before and after questionnaire	79 Nurses	Expand our skills workshop	No comparison group	A workshop such as the one described in this article may be useful to facilitate the inclusion of assistants in models of care, and improve

					reception of the introduction of assistants by professional staff.
Fronek et al. 2009[20]	Training evaluation (questionnaire with open ended questions)	109 health care professionals and support workers	Inter-professional course	No comparison group	Courses such as this may help define boundaries between assistants and professionals, and improve collaboration in models of care.
Gould et al. 1996[31]	Survey	Registered Nurses and Nurse Assistants	Introduction of a redesigned role	No comparison group	By analysing and redesigning the role of the assistant, a more effective model of care may be able to be developed.
Plack et al. 2006[15]	Mixed methods study, pre-test/post-test questionnaires, focus groups	34 first year physical therapy students and 21 second year physical therapy assistant students. Also included for comparison were 24 second and 22 third year physical therapist assistants, who did not partake in the same collaborative course with assistants as the first year students. Two focus groups consisting of 6 assistants and 5 physical therapists respectively	Collaborative learning instructional model	No comparison group	The strategy of using classroom sessions to teach physical therapists regarding assistants, and then to have them collaborate in a session whilst still learning, can be considered an effective and appropriate strategy to establish the health assistant role as a recognised delegated clinical role and promote their inclusion in models of care.
Yeatts et al. 2007[32]	Multi-method, pre-test/post-test design with comparison group and qualitative data.	Certified Nursing Assistants in 10 nursing homes (5 experimental, 5 comparison)	Empowered work teams	Control group	A study that evaluates empowered work teams in nursing homes.

Methodological quality

All studies met the inclusion criteria and were deemed of sufficient methodological quality. Despite this, the majority of the quantitative studies were of low quality, with qualitative studies generally of higher quality. Some of the studies were appraised twice as they were mixed-methods – once for their quantitative component, and once for their qualitative. Table 3 presents the appraisal results for the quantitative studies, and Table 4 for the results of the qualitative studies. The questions referred to in these tables are listed in Appendix 2.

Table 3: Critical appraisal using the MAStARI Appraisal Instrument ***(Appendix 2)***

Randomised Control Trial / Pseudo-randomised Trial

Citation	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
Yeatts, 2007[32]	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Y	U	Y	Y	Y

Descriptive / Case Series Studies

Citation	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9
Plack 2006[15]	U	U	U	Y	Y	U	U	Y	Y
Gould 1996[31]	U	U	U	Y	Y	Y	U	Y	Y
Fronek 2009[20]	U	U	U	Y	Y	U	U	Y	Y
Clayworth 1997[30]	U	U	U	Y	Y	U	U	Y	Y
Chow 2010[29]	U	U	U	Y	Y	U	U	Y	Y
Bergin 2009[28]	U	U	U	Y	Y	U	U	Y	Y

Y=Yes, N=No, N/A= Not Applicable, U= Unclear

Table 4: Critical appraisal using the QARI Appraisal Instrument ***(Appendix 2)***

Citation	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9	Q10
Plack et al. 2006[15]	N	N	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
Hauxwell 2002[22]	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	U	Y
Jung et al. 2008[24]	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
Jelley et al. 2010[13]	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
Jung et al. 2002[25]	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	U	Y
Potter et al. 2004[27]	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	U	Y
Nancarrow et al. 2005[26]	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
Fronek et al. 2009[20]	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	U	Y
Johnson et al. 2004[23]	N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	Y	Y	Y
Hancock et al. 2005[21]	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Y	U	Y	Y	Y

Quantitative results

Although seven of the studies were deemed to meet the inclusion criteria, these studies were of low quality, and due to differences in study design, outcomes, populations, and interventions, the findings could not be pooled in statistical meta-analysis. Instead, a narrative summary of the studies was constructed (Appendix 4). There is also a component of the literature review focusing on this question.

Qualitative results

From the 10 studies included in the qualitative component of this review, 66 findings were extracted. A summary of the studies and their findings were created for each of the 10 included qualitative studies (Appendix 5).

Meta-Synthesis of the findings extracted from included studies

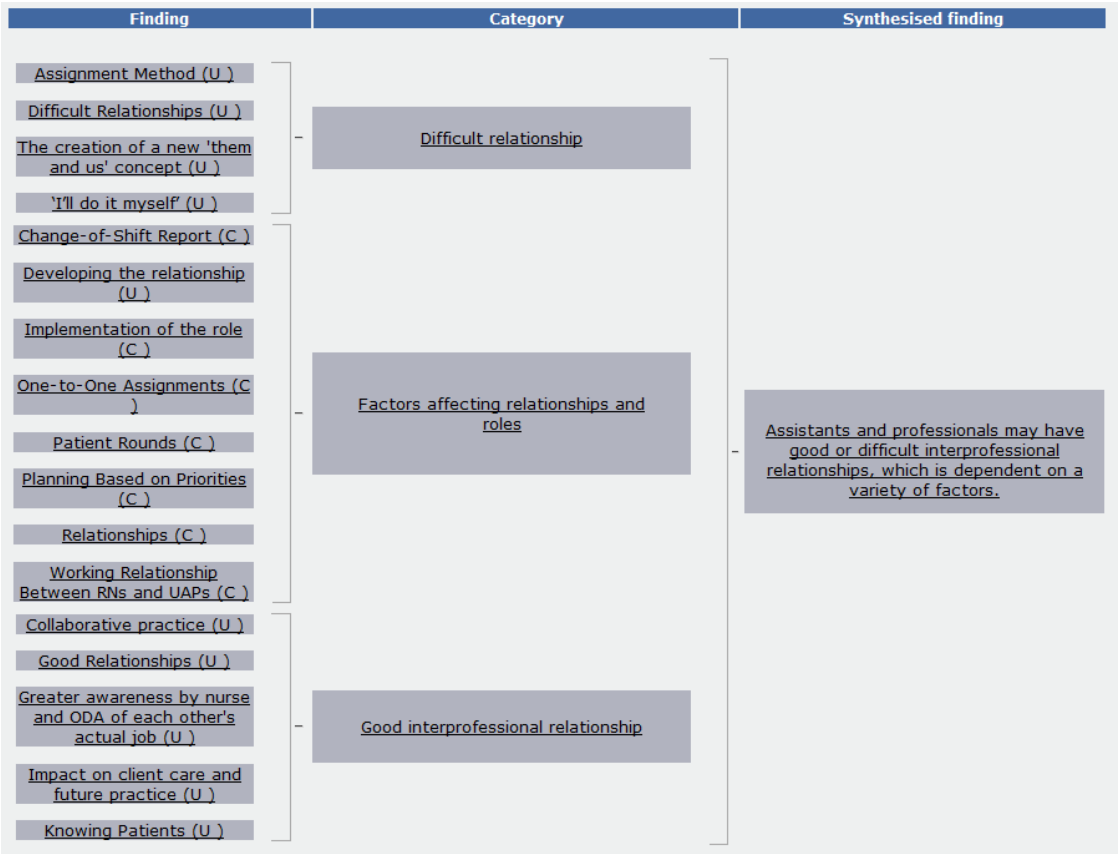
Categorisation and synthesis of findings

Once the 66 findings were extracted from the included studies, they were collated to form user-defined categories based on identified similarities.[18] This moves from a focus on individual studies to consideration of all findings for all studies included in the review. A total of 11 categories were created on the basis of similarities in meaning. From these 11 categories, four synthesised findings (meta-syntheses) were produced.

Meta-synthesis 1: Assistants and professionals may have good or difficult inter-professional relationships, which is dependent on a variety of factors.

This meta-synthesis derives from 17 findings and is formed into three categories (refer to Figure 2). This synthesised finding highlights the different types of relationships that exist between the assistants and health professionals. These relationships can be tense or stressed, or may be functional and effective, characterised by collaborative practice. Different factors can influence the relationships, such as different staffing models, how the role was implemented, and how they interact and work together.

Figure 2: Meta-synthesis 1

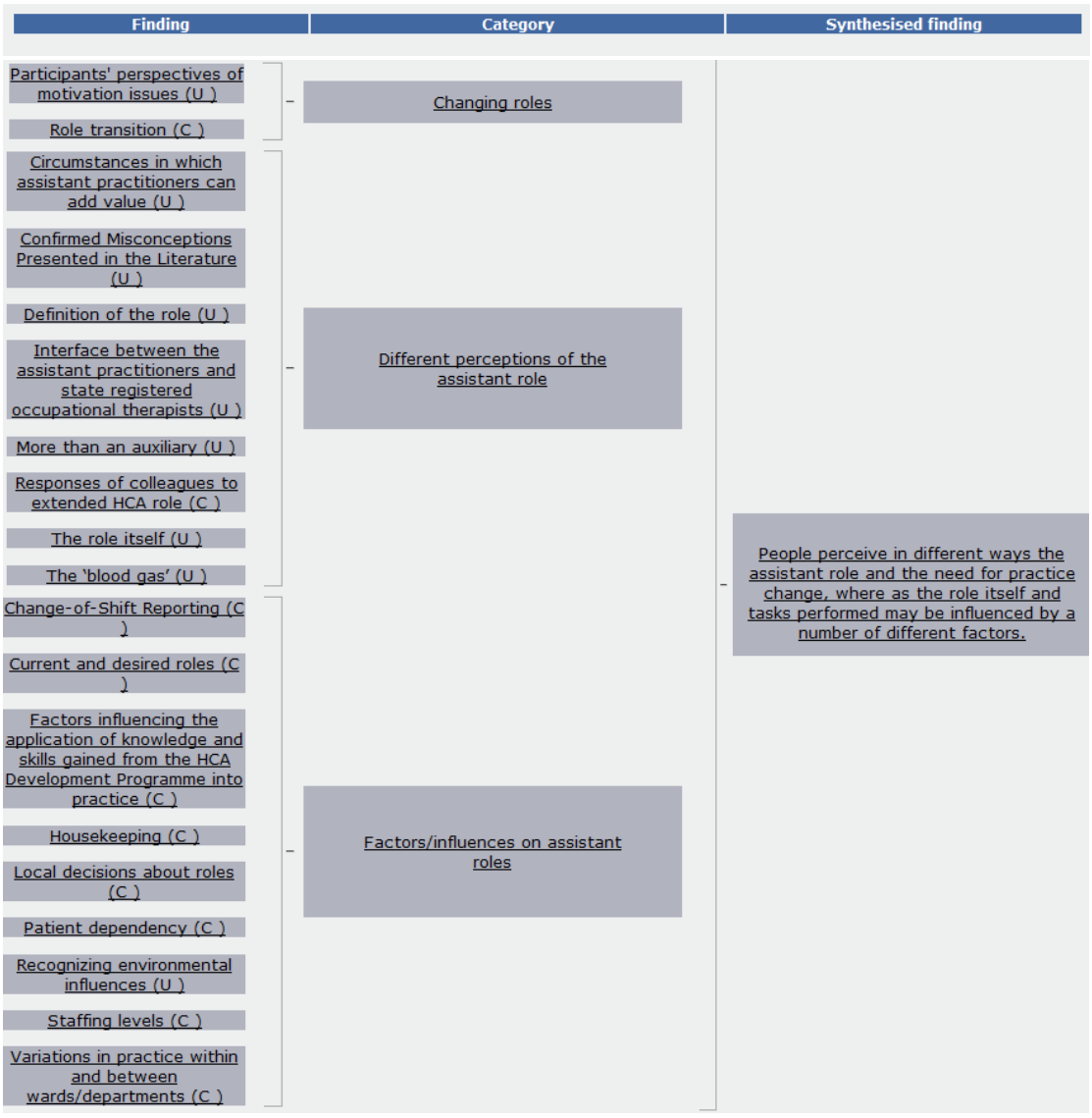


U=Unequivocal finding, C= Credible finding

Meta-synthesis 2: People perceive in different ways the assistant role and the need for practice change, whereas the role itself and tasks performed may be influenced by a number of different factors.

This meta-synthesis derives from 19 findings and is formed into three categories (refer to Figure 3). This synthesised finding highlights the different ways that people perceive the role of the assistant, both from professionals and assistants themselves, and their role in changing practice. The role itself, and the tasks performed by the assistants, is dependent on a number of factors, including the local context and environmental issues, patient dependency, and staff levels.

Figure 3: Meta-synthesis 2

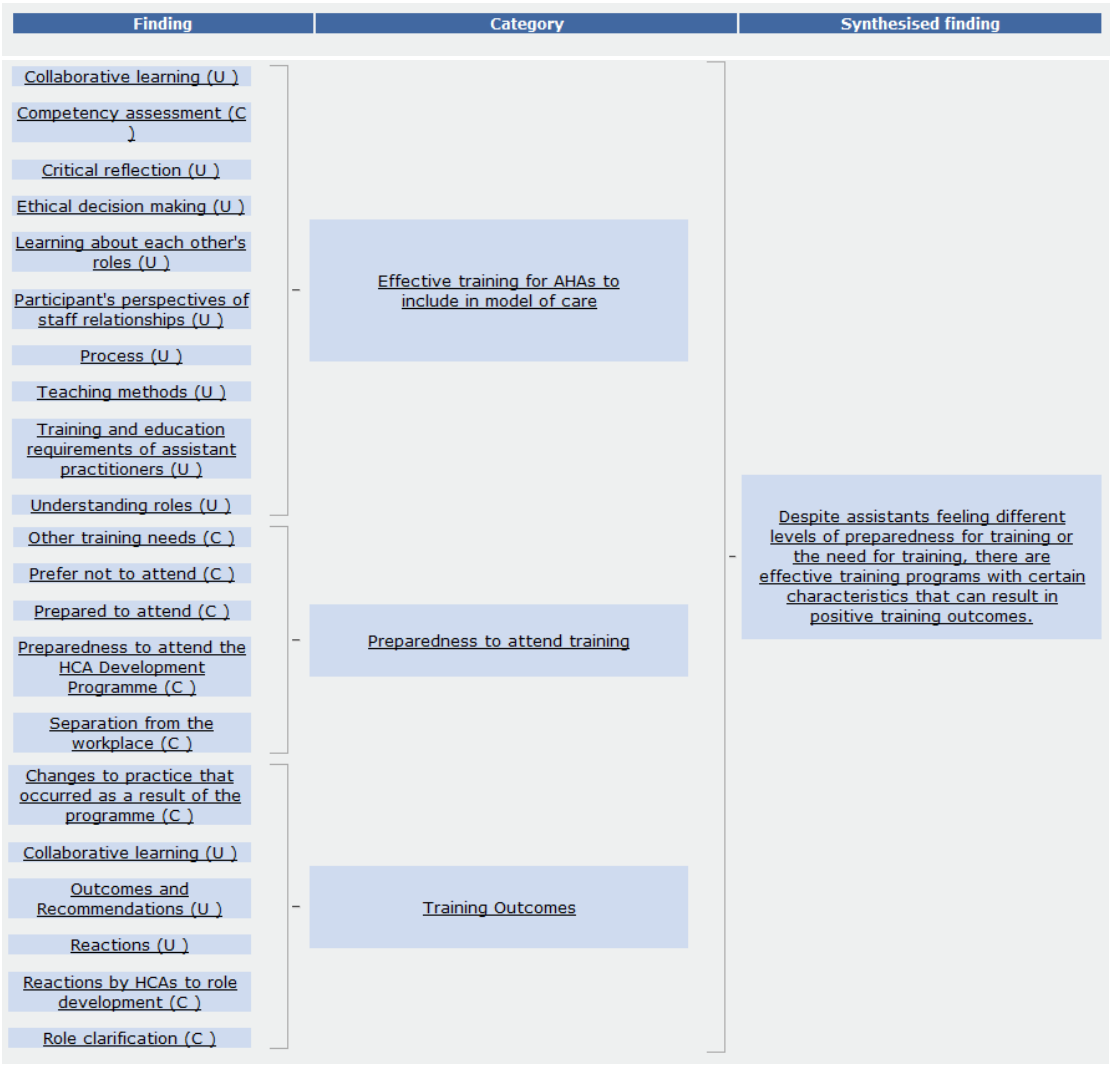


**U=Unequivocal finding, C= Credible finding*

Meta-synthesis 3: Despite assistants feeling different levels of preparedness for training or the need for training, there are effective training programs with certain characteristics that can result in positive training outcomes.

This meta-synthesis derives from 21 findings and is formed into three categories (refer to Figure 4). This synthesis highlights the assistants may or may not feel a need for training, and they may have different levels of preparedness for training programs. However, training programs can be effective in producing positive results; these training programs are characterised by collaborative learning, providing opportunity to learn about each other's roles, assessment of competencies, and certain teaching methods, such as hands on and practical activities, and having intimate learning groups.

Figure 4: Meta-synthesis 3

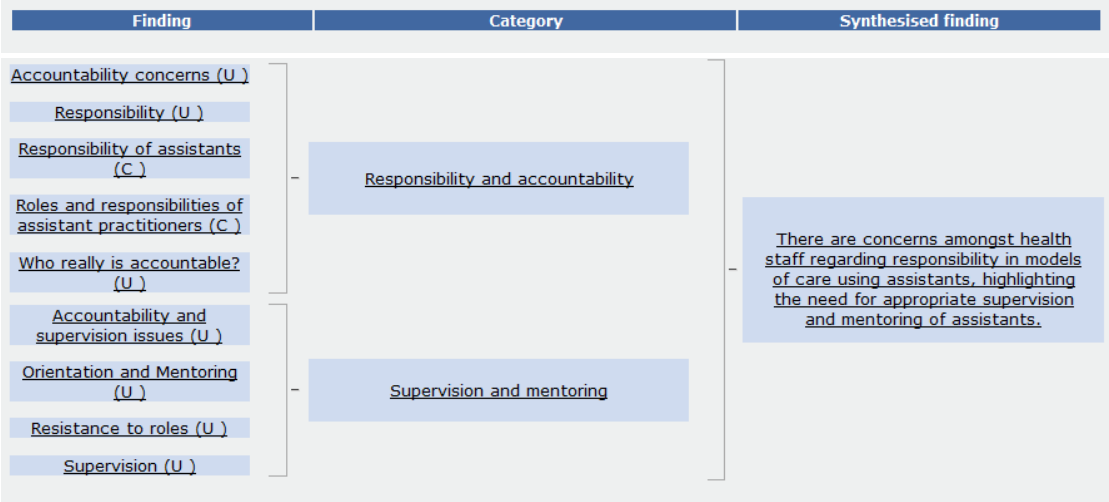


**U=Unequivocal finding, C= Credible finding*

Meta-synthesis 4: There are concerns amongst health staff regarding responsibility in models of care using assistants, highlighting the need for appropriate supervision and mentoring of assistants.

This meta-synthesis derives from 9 findings and is formed into 2 categories (refer to Figure 5). This synthesised finding highlights concerns amongst both assistants and professionals regarding the responsibility and accountability when models of care include assistants. Adequate supervision and mentoring of assistants by professionals, with clear responsibility and accountability for roles, is required.

Figure 5: Meta-synthesis 4



*U=Unequivocal finding, C= Credible finding

Discussion

For this question, 15 studies were deemed suitable for inclusion in the systematic component of this review. These were a mix of qualitative and quantitative designs. The results of the quantitative studies included in this question and the meta-syntheses address the review question on strategies to establish the health assistant role as a recognised delegated clinical role and to promote their inclusion in models of care. From the included seven quantitative studies, strategies such as empowered work teams, collaborative learning, analysing and redesigning the assistant role and educational courses/workshops have been used to facilitate the inclusion of assistants in models of care. Other studies described how introductions of new models of care were incorporated into practice, and these experiences may be able to help inform those wishing to pursue such a model.

Analysis of the included qualitative studies resulted in four meta-synthesised findings. These meta-syntheses address the relationship between assistants and professionals, what affects the assistant's role and how it is perceived, training programs for assistants and professionals, and accountability and supervision concerns.

The first synthesised finding, 'assistants and professionals may have good or difficult inter-professional relationships, which is dependent on a variety of factors,' provides information regarding the influencing factors that contribute to successful relationships between assistants and professionals, and can thereby help inform how to promote good working relationships for models of care including assistants and professionals.

The second synthesised finding, 'people perceive in different ways the assistant role and the need for practice change, whereas the role itself and tasks performed may be influenced by a number of different factors,' highlights the various ways (both positive and negative) that the assistant role is perceived, and describes the factors that may influence the role the assistant performs in models of care.

The third synthesised finding, 'despite assistants feeling different levels of preparedness for training or the need for training, there are effective training programs with certain characteristics that can result in positive training outcomes,' highlights the need for effective educational and training programs for assistants, whilst stressing the importance of preparing assistants for such training. If educational programs are to be used as a strategy to incorporate assistants in models of care, the characteristics of effective training programs should be considered.

The final synthesised finding, 'there are concerns amongst health staff regarding responsibility in models of care using assistants, highlighting the need for appropriate supervision and mentoring of assistants,' details the concerns that exist within models of care using assistants, and provides guidance on the need to clearly outline accountability, responsibility, supervision and mentoring issues.

Together, these synthesised findings can be used to provide guidance on the education of assistants and health professionals, and when preparing to incorporate assistants in models of care.

Recommendations for practice

From the included studies in the systematic component of this review for question 2, the following recommendations have been made, all of which are assigned a grade and a level of evidence according to the Joanna Briggs institute Levels of Evidence and Grades of Recommendation (Appendix 6). Grade A recommendations have 'strong support that merits application,' whilst Grade B recommendations have moderate support that warrants consideration of application. Summaries of the studies are reported in Appendices 4 and 5.

- Where possible, undergraduate allied health professionals and allied health assistants in training should have the opportunity to interact with each other, either in the classroom or in the clinical setting, as this has been shown to result in collaborative relationships. (Level 3) (Grade B)
- Educational courses/workshops for assistants and professionals regarding working with assistants have been shown to improve collaboration and may be recommended. (Level 3) (Grade B)
- Empowered assistant work teams are one strategy that has resulted in improved practice for nursing assistants, and may be considered. (Level 3) (Grade B)
- Prior to introducing assistants, it may be useful to analyse and design their role in the setting, in consultation with staff, as this has been shown to result in positive outcomes in nursing assistant roles. (Level 3) (Grade B)
- Relationships between assistants and professionals are dependent on a range of factors, all of which need to be considered when incorporating assistants in models of care. (Level 1) (Grade A)
- A number of different factors influence the assistant role, and policymakers need to be aware that people perceive the role and need for practice change differently. (Level 1) (Grade A)
- The preparedness of assistants to undertake training programs needs to be considered when running training courses; as do the characteristics of effective training programs. (Level 1) (Grade A)
- Due to the concerns of health professionals regarding responsibility in models of care using assistants, there is a need for appropriate supervision and mentoring of assistants in these models. (Level 1) (Grade A)

7. Systematic Review Findings related to Question 3: Effective/appropriate strategies to promote consistency and standardisation of vocational training delivered to health assistants

During the systematic search, a number of studies were deemed as potentially relevant to this question. However, after retrieving the full text, only two studies met the inclusion criteria. Table 5 contains a description of the included studies.

Although these were deemed to meet the inclusion criteria, these studies were of low quality. Table 6 contains the results of the critical appraisal. Due to differences in study design, outcomes, populations, and interventions, the findings could not be pooled using a meta-analysis. Instead, a narrative review of the studies was conducted (Appendix 7). There is also a component of the literature review focusing on question 3.

Quantitative results

Table 5: Quantitative Included studies

Study	Methods	Participants	Intervention A	Intervention B	Notes
Barr et al. 1982[33]	Descriptive survey	909 participants; 134 Academic Coordinators of Clinical Education, 708 Centre Coordinators of Clinical Education, 15 Clinical instructors, and 52 physical therapist or physical therapy assistance students	Standards and evaluation forms for physical therapy clinical education	N/A	This study provided an example of how standards could be systematically developed and tested for clinical education in physical therapy.
Crist et al. 2007[34]	Descriptive survey	479 Entry level Occupational Therapists and 168 Occupational Therapy Assistants	No intervention - survey	N/A	A descriptive survey with implications for fieldwork educators.

Table 6: Critical appraisal using the MAStARI Appraisal Instrument ***(Appendix 2)***

Descriptive / Case Series Studies

Citation	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9
Barr 1982[33]	U	U	U	Y	Y	U	U	Y	Y
Crist 2007[34]	U	U	U	Y	Y	U	U	Y	Y

Y=Yes, N=No, N/A= Not Applicable, U= Unclear

Discussion

For this question, only two studies were included in the systematic component of this review. These two studies addressed consistency and standardisation of vocational training for health assistants. One of the papers provided an example of how standards could be developed and tested[33], whilst the other provided an analysis of current entry level practice to inform fieldwork[34]. These two studies may be used to provide guidance when developing strategies to promote consistency and standardisation of vocational training for health assistants. However, due to the low quality of the included studies, and the limited literature available for inclusion in this review, caution is advisable if using this research to guide policy.

Recommendations for practice

From the included studies in the systematic component of this review for question 3, the following recommendation has been made, which is assigned a grade and a level of evidence according to the Joanna Briggs institute Levels of Evidence and Grades of Recommendation (Appendix 6).

- There is an acknowledged need for consistency and standardisation of vocational training programs nationally for health assistants, and programs should be designed as such. (Level 4) (Grade B)

8. Systematic Review Findings related to Question 4: Effective/appropriate strategies to adapt vocational training programs to local context in healthcare

During the systematic search, a number of studies were deemed as potentially relevant to this question. However, after retrieving the full text, no studies met the inclusion criteria. Due to this, a narrative summary was produced to discuss effective/appropriate strategies to increase/promote recruitment and retention of health assistants in vocational training programs.

9. Systematic Review Findings related to Question 5: Effective/appropriate strategies to increase the relevance and understanding of vocational training amongst allied health professionals and health assistants

During the systematic search, a number of studies were deemed as potentially relevant to this question. However, after retrieving the full text, only one study met the inclusion criteria.

Table 6 contains a description of the included study.

Table 7 contains the results of the critical appraisal.

Quantitative results

Table 6: Quantitative included studies

Study	Methods	Participants	Intervention A	Intervention B	Notes
Lin et al. 2003[35]	Descriptive survey	The sample was randomly selected from 20 facilities, with 165 nursing aides completing the questionnaires	Structured and semi-structured questionnaires	N/A	The findings from this study may assist educators in increasing the relevance of training amongst health assistants.

Table 7: Critical appraisal using the MAStARI Appraisal Instrument ***(Appendix 2)***

Citation	Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7	Q8	Q9
Lin et al. 2003[35]	Y	U	U	Y	Y	U	U	Y	Y

Y=Yes, N=No, N/A= Not Applicable, U= Unclear

Although one study was deemed to meet the inclusion criteria, it was of low quality.
A narrative review of the study is included in Appendix 8. There is also a component of the literature review focusing on question 5.

Discussion

The one study included in this review highlighted components of a training program that were either well received or not. These findings may be able to provide guidance to increase the relevance and understanding of vocational training amongst allied health professionals and health assistants. However, due to the low quality of the included study, and the limited literature available for inclusion in this review, caution is advisable if using this research to guide policy.

Recommendations for practice

From the included studies in the systematic component of this review for question 5, the following recommendation has been made, which is assigned a grade and a level of evidence

according to the Joanna Briggs institute Levels of Evidence and Grades of Recommendation (Appendix 6).

- Different characteristics of training may be preferred or be more relevant for health assistants in training. Training should be designed in order to be as relevant as possible for health assistants. (Level 3) (Grade B)

10. Literature Review on Question 1: Effective/appropriate strategies to increase/promote recruitment and retention of health assistants in vocational training programs

Introduction

In the systematic review component of this project, no studies were identified that directly addressed this point. With the introduction of nationally endorsed VET programs offering formal qualifications in allied health assistance, there is a need to adopt strategies to increase and promote recruitment and retention of allied health assistants into these training courses. Considering the acknowledged importance of allied health assistants in healthcare and a recognised need and desire for further education amongst health assistants in the literature,[36,37,38] it is surprising that readily identifiable strategies aimed at increasing the recruitment and retention of health assistants in vocational training programs were scarce in the Australian and International literature. No studies were identified that directly addressed the effectiveness or appropriateness of recruitment and retention strategies to existing programs. Nevertheless, the available international literature reveals a range of factors that appear to both motivate and inhibit participation of health assistants in formal training that may be considered in the Australian context.

Education and training is required for assistants in healthcare as they develop in their role.[36,37,38] Despite the continued expansion of the role of health assistants and the significant impact they have on patient care, they often receive less training or opportunities for education than qualified staff.[39, 40] It has been shown that when vocational programs exist for health assistants, demand often exceeds positions available.[39] Many assistants would appreciate the opportunity for further training, formal or informal,[41] whether to continue development in their assistant role or to progress further into a professional role (eg become a physiotherapist rather than a physiotherapy assistant). For example, it was identified that a third of nursing assistants aspire to become qualified nurses, which highlights the need for career pathways to enable this.[42] Similarly, another survey found that 84% of nursing assistants wanted to become registered nurses, but the lack of opportunities deterred them.[43]

Even the perception of the availability of training has been linked to positive outcomes.[44] In a cross-sectional survey of 359 certified nursing assistants in nursing homes, the perception that training was available if required, was positively associated with information exchange, procedures used for residents, and satisfaction/commitment and feelings of empowerment.[44] There are moral and practical obligations of health systems to enable staff who have the potential or talents to progress with options to do so.[42]

Motivators and barriers

By understanding the factors that either motivate or dissuade people to undertake vocational training, recruitment and retention strategies can be developed to take these into account. Much of the identified literature focused on the barriers to uptake of these courses.

Finances

An article noted that if students have a monetary investment in their course, they are more likely to complete the course than those who undergo it at no charge. Therefore, a small charge was enacted for their course.[45] More commonly, however, costs were identified as a barrier to training. In a training system for physiotherapy assistants, there were access difficulties due to costs and insufficient supervisors/assessors.[41] A survey found many health assistants were unable to undergo formal nurse training due to domestic and financial constraints.[46] There was also a perception that health assistants who did undertake further training were inadequately recognised. This recognition could come in the form of pay incentives and increased responsibility.[37] The barriers to recruitment for a certified nursing assistant program were identified as: reluctance to resign from current position to begin a class with no guarantees, reluctance to enter a course with a ‘signed on’ agreement, loss of income during the course, and inability to afford the course.[47]

These barriers were addressed in one setting by paying students to attend class which covered course costs, to offer employment following successful course completion, and by not linking course completion with a time commitment to serve at the organisation conducting the training.[47]

Occupational therapy

A descriptive study was performed to determine the factors which motivate occupational therapy assistants to seek further education to become a registered occupational therapist. The two major factors were identified: professional advancement and cognitive interest.[48] Other factors included educational preparation, communication improvement, social contact and family togetherness. Additional themes raised included the need for career mobility and opportunity, independence, lack of recognition and respect for assistants from therapists and those outside the field of occupational therapy, financial reasons, lack of communication, the need for others to understand assistant and therapist roles and relationships, and the need for the educational background and competency levels of the assistant to be recognised by the therapist and those outside the field of occupational therapy. To meet the needs of assistants and others wishing to undertake further training to become full registered professionals, educational programs may need to consider non-traditional programs.[48]

A pilot study was performed to determine the factors that influence occupational therapy assistants to pursue further education to become a registered occupational therapist. The most influential motivators were to expand employment options, to improve professional skills, develop professional knowledge, and increase professional autonomy. Stressors were also identified, the major ones being; school assignments, lack of leisure, time management, and financial strains. Resources and supports were determined, with a supportive spouse or significant others, personal commitment to career development, assistant skills and knowledge and feedback and support from faculty members rated as the most important when pursuing professional education.[49] Desirable program characteristics included availability of weekend classes (allowing assistants to continue working) and accessibility.[49]

Indigenous health workers

An exploratory study in Northwest Queensland identified the following barriers to advanced education for indigenous health workers: desire to remain in the indigenous health sector, support barriers, family ties, and negative perceptions of workplace environments, infrastructure barriers, lack of knowledge and awareness of the course, and lack of belief that they can successfully complete the education.[50]

Programs for training

Due to difficulties with recruiting and retaining staff in certain areas and other health pressures in the UK,[51] individual hospitals have been encouraged to develop their own recruitment and retention strategies, and be flexible in regards to developing the health workforce.[39, 51] Some hospitals have taken the initiative to provide further training to health assistants.[39, 51] One article described the use of a foundation apprenticeship scheme at a hospital in Sheffield, which was developed due to added benefits over other schemes, and suited the local context. Following successful completion of the apprenticeship, the health assistant is guaranteed a job position.[39] Benefits of the scheme include supporting recruitment and retention by offering an alternative mode of career progression, having inclusive entry criteria, cost effective, work-based education and training, develops flexible practitioners, provides vocational education and training opportunities, and opportunities for qualified nurses to develop assessment and training skills. As the areas surrounding the hospital are disadvantaged socioeconomically, the scheme also offers employment opportunities to young people who may struggle to find employment.[39] Many of the people aiming to undertake foundation degrees may be currently working. In this way, the foundation degree provides flexibility to those who may not have considered higher education for

professional development, enabling them to 'earn and learn'.[52] Although a degree in their own right, they can also be used to fast track to a professional qualification.

Recruitment

There are only a small number of papers that addressed the issue of recruitment of health assistants in vocational training programs. Recognition of prior learning, current competencies and prior learning fees are all strategies that may increase/promote recruitment of assistants in vocational training programs.[9] The issues that surfaced in these papers and a summary of their content is described below.

In the United States, physical therapist and physical therapy assistant recruitment has been difficult since the 1990s.[53] Despite the efforts of physical therapists and physical therapy assistants, there is still a low profile (lack of awareness) regarding the profession amongst students and minimal knowledge on how to enter the profession. This may be in part due to school counsellors having a lack of knowledge regarding the profession and its prospects, a discontented workforce putting off prospective students, and the need for quality applicants to enter the workforce. Therefore strategies are required to promote the profession, its advantages, and enhance recognition of the role of the physical therapist and physical therapy assistant.[53]

One approach to address workforce shortage is to 'grow your own,' or provide training to lower levels of staffing so that they can take on more advanced roles.[54] Ancillary health personnel may be a worthwhile group to recruit to nursing. These individuals have worked with registered nurses, understand what nursing is, and witnessed the demands of the profession.[55] Aggressive marketing campaigns, flexible program options and tuition assistance are all strategies to improve recruitment into nursing from assistants.[55] Due to difficulties recruiting new entrants to nursing, secondment programs to recruit health assistants to undertake formal pre-registration university courses have been touted as a possible strategy to improve recruitment,[43] where they receive financial support in the form of a salary and fees are paid. In a survey, 97% of health assistants would be encouraged to take up training if offered professional secondment.[43] There is currently little literature that assesses the effectiveness of secondment schemes. Drawn from traditional nursing pre-registration education, characteristics linked to successful completion included mature women with care experience, and previous academic studies. Aspects of the curriculum, particularly science, present difficulties, especially for those who have not studied biology previously.[40] Often, nursing assistants are blocked from further studies due to the availability of courses offered only as full-time studies, which is not feasible for many assistants who are also working full-time.[54] Seconding existing health assistants to traditional pre-registration nursing programs is one possible solution to attrition rates from these programs. Some barriers to the course include anxieties regarding the course and the academic content, new responsibilities, the public nature of failure, personal costs, length of time and degree of commitment. It was suggested that secondment may not offer a ready solution and that there may only be limited potential to recruit from this group.[56]

Retention

Retention is an issue of concern for health assistants undergoing training, and in one paper it was noted anecdotally that perhaps only 50% of those who enter physical therapy assistant programs will complete it.[53] However, by introducing key skills from the beginning of training, retention and achievements are improved,[39] and learners were found to respond well to practical activities.[39]

A report assessing advancement for low wage workers described case studies of four organisations with career ladders for health assistants to progress towards licensed practical nurses, which differ from the traditional licensed practical nursing (LPN) training program and were successful in assisting low wage workers with limited previous education to finish demanding LPN training.[57] These programs provided intensive academic remediation in writing, maths and reading, offered flexible training schedules, and formal tutoring. In addition,

they offered employer financial support, classes on the worksite or close to it, and clear rewards with progression in the course.[57] The retention and completion rates for all the courses were noted as impressive.[57]

A program for certified nursing assistant progression to licensed practical nurse at the Community College of Denver found that the fast pace of the education at the start of learning led to attrition, and therefore the learning module was extended. During difficult modules, attrition was the highest. The students in the program enjoyed the cohort model and the support they received from other students, and also the support from their employer.[57]

It is essential that education programs for assistants attempting to become professionals provide active support and assistance to the student. As this group can be considered non-traditional students, different learning options may be needed; one example of this is providing flexible class times, such as in the evening or on the weekend.[49] By providing students with the option to undertake an occupational therapy assistant degree, with the option to progress to an occupational therapist masters degree, one university has seen an improvement in student numbers and retention.[58]

Conclusion

The international literature informing recruitment and retention to VET programs in allied health and nursing highlights a number of potential strategies, many of which have been adopted by the VET sector in Australia. Vocational training programs for allied health are being delivered in a variety of modalities[59] such as face to face, workplace based, and external study modes using online learning.[59] This range of study modes have all been shown to be preferred by health assistants in the international literature.[49, 50, 54, 56, 57, 60] The cost of training need to be addressed as this has been found to be a substantial barrier to recruitment into courses directed at health assistants internationally, and health organisations within Australia may consider providing financial support to staff undertaking such courses beyond incentives provided by government. Policy makers attempting to address recruitment and attrition issues to VET programs should be informed by these motivators and barriers when further exploring and developing strategies for allied health assistants. The above evidence suggests that financial reimbursement and guaranteed employment upon completion of the training may alleviate the cost associated with allied health assistance training programs; that academic support, program flexibility and program applicability all increase the attractiveness of training programs for participants; and that the distribution of information highlighting the health assistants role and its career potential can increase recruitment to allied health assistant VET programs.

Recommendations for practice

The following recommendations have been made from the included studies in the literature review component of this review for question 1, all of which are assigned a grade and a level of evidence according to the Joanna Briggs institute Levels of Evidence and Grades of Recommendation (Appendix 6).

- The evidence suggests that the distribution of information highlighting the health assistant role and its career potential can increase recruitment to allied health assistant VET programs. (Level 4) (Grade B)
- The evidence suggests that academic support, program flexibility and program applicability all increase the attractiveness of training programs for participants. (Level 4) (Grade B)
- The evidence suggests that financial reimbursement measures and guaranteed employment upon completion of training may address the deterrent to allied health assistant training imposed by costs. (Level 4) (Grade B)

11. Literature Review on Question 2: Effective/appropriate strategies to establish the health assistant role as a recognised delegated clinical role and promote their inclusion in models of care

The need for assistants

In Australia, and much of the western world, the population is growing, living longer, and chronic disease is increasing, which all impact significantly on the health system.[61] Traditional practices in healthcare are being redesigned in order to meet the demands of the health care industry, particularly delivering health care that is equitable, accessible, efficient, and effective.[62] One strategy is to change the role of health professionals, and introduce more multi-skilled workers. This would involve role substitution, whereby health professionals and assistants take on tasks and roles previously provided by other professionals or medical specialists. This may result in moving away from the mono-professional basis for education programs and health professionals.[61] By having assistants provide direct patient care,[4, 5] this enable health professionals to spend more time on complex patient care activities.[61-63] As such, expanding the use of allied health assistants may address the increased demand for allied health services,[61, 64] with significant cost and other benefits.[1, 4, 5, 12, 65.]

Internationally and within Australia, the role that health assistants play varies widely and includes both clinical and non-clinical duties.[1, 9]. The clinical and non-clinical roles and tasks that health assistants undertake are inconsistent both within and across the different health professions.[1, 9, 38, 66.] Some of the clinical duties provided by allied health assistants include patient education, performing clinical procedures and assisting allied health professionals. Their non-clinical activities include administrative duties, preparation and maintenance of environments, record keeping and housekeeping duties.[1]

The completion of the Certificate III and IV in Allied Health Assistance has been introduced in Australia to further promote and define the allied health assistant as a recognisable delegated clinical role. Different allied health peak bodies in Australia have developed standards or guidance regarding the use of assistants within their profession.[10, 67, 68] However, further steps are needed to facilitate the incorporation of assistants within models of care within Australia, and ensure they have a recognised delegated clinical role. A number of studies were identified that directly informed the systematic review component for this question. The effectiveness and appropriateness of strategies informed by these studies has been discussed above. However, the wider international literature has been addressed to further support the relevance and direction of strategies identified. Due to differences in workforce characteristics of the included studies, it may be difficult to apply findings generated from one healthcare setting into another.[69]

Cost-effectiveness is a common reason put forward for introducing health assistants. From a survey of managers, the following reasons for introducing health assistants were identified; cost effectiveness was ranked as the main reason, followed by flexible hours and deployment.[46] It has been found for certain professions, such as occupational therapy,[65] that assistants do offer cost-effective and broad services. By delegating routine tasks to physiotherapy assistants, quality services will be able to be delivered at reduced costs.[4, 5] As an example, early mobilisation and early initiation of physical therapy is important in the critical care setting, but due to the number of complex cases and the lack of availability of physical therapists, physical therapy services offered may be limited. Assistants can be of great use in these cases.[70] Benefits resulting from the use of allied health assistants include improved outcomes, additional time to perform complex tasks for allied health personnel, increased patient satisfaction and the provision of higher level services.[1]

The complexity of practice and the shortage of professionals are two other cited reasons for the use of assistants,[71] allowing an increase in the number of clients seen by professionals.[63, 64, 72]

Allied health professions utilise assistants in a range of disciplines, including podiatry, occupational therapy, physiotherapy,[64] speech and language therapy, dietetics and radiography.[64] Allied health assistants providing supportive tasks to the allied health professional and care to the patient as prescribed by the allied health professional can bring about the 'unburdening' of the allied health professional, particularly in the rural health setting.[73]

Barriers to incorporation in models of care

However, barriers to the introduction of assistants have been identified, including a lack of clarity regarding the role of allied health assistants, confusion regarding tasks, and difficulties of health professionals letting go of their work.[1] In addition, professionals may perceive the role of assistants as a threat to their practice.[46 ,74, 75,76] This may be due to the boundaries between roles in the hospital setting being seen as blurred and fluid.[46] One study identified that nursing assistants saw little differences between their role and the nurses role, other than accountability, medication administration, and paperwork.[74] Similarly, this also occurs when rehabilitation therapy assistants are used.[36] The blurring of roles may be due to role ambiguity, which results from a lack of clarity about duties, authority, allocation of time, and relationships with others. Conflict and ambiguity occur when tasks and activities are not assigned specifically to the roles.[77] There is a need for clear and unambiguous guidelines detailing the scope of practice of assistants.[8]

Criticism of the use of unlicensed assistive supportive personnel (UAP) (personal care assistants and certified nurse's aides) exists in the literature, and there have been negative reactions to the introduction of unlicensed assistive personnel.[78,79] The use of unlicensed assistive supportive personnel can be infuriating to professional nurses, as it implies professional nurses are expendable and can be replaced. The introduction of UAP forces the restructure of the role of the professional nurse (PN) to supervise and delegate tasks to UAP, and not perform them themselves.[79] Due to a lack of clarification surrounding the role of UAPs, there are different views regarding their role, and what they can and cannot do. As PN's are responsible for UAPs, many worry about professional and legal risks that may arise from working with UAPs.[79] PNs also fear giving up control of patient care, may feel they have nothing to attain by helping UAPs, and feel that due to the need to oversee and supervise tasks by the UAP, they are taken away from patient care and lose traditional aspects of their role.[79] UAPs are also said to pose a risk to patient safety, if they perform tasks outside their remit. The quality of care provided can also be diminished when delivered by UAPs. The use of UAPs has been described as a poorly thought out quick fix to the shortage of nurses.[79]

Role of assistants

The role of the assistants varied significantly in the literature, and it was identified that they perform both clinical and non-clinical duties.[1, 9]

Physiotherapy assistants

Assistants are used extensively in physical therapy, however, their duties vary significantly.[63] Tasks of the physiotherapist assistant varied, but consisted of patient care, clerical work, and domestic tasks.[41] Many surveys and studies have been undertaken across the globe to determine the utilisation and role of physiotherapy assistants. In Canada, a survey identified that the duties of the assistant varied significantly across settings. The authors recommended that the roles of physical therapists and physical therapy assistants be defined and differentiated from each other.[63] In the United Kingdom, a large variation was seen in the levels of supervision of the assistants and the tasks they performed. For some tasks, such as electrotherapy, there was confusion regarding whether or not assistants should perform these activities. Changes in the workplace, such as staff shortages, increasing service demands, additional supervisory staff, and alterations in funding and training schemes affected the utilisation of assistants. The major issue that requires addressing from the study was the need for a standardised approach to the role of physiotherapy assistants, along with an associated grading structure.[80] Another UK survey found that assistants were employed in a wide range

of settings, and in a wide range of clinical areas, with the majority in elderly and orthopaedic care, and that there was a wide variation in the skills between physiotherapy assistants.[41]

In Indiana in the United States, treatments that were delivered by assistants without supervision included hot/cold packs, ultrasound, paraffin, and whirlpool. A number of responders stated that the use of aides had presented them with an ethical dilemma and many also desired guidelines on aide use.[71]

Within Australia, the Australian Physiotherapy Council has provided guidelines for physiotherapists working with assistants/aides.[10] General principles regarding the use of assistants state that they should not be used as substitutes for physiotherapists in certain tasks (assessment, diagnosis, education, program planning and evaluation), there needs to be direct or indirect supervision depending on the level of the assistant, condition of the patient and the task they are performing, and assistants must perform procedures in accordance with prescribed treatment plans.[10]

Occupational therapy assistants

There has been protracted and heated debate over the role and training of the occupational therapy assistant.[81] Occupational therapy assistants have been described as having good clinical reasoning and technical skills, are able to think critically, can participate collaboratively in care, and work with and form strong interpersonal relationships with diverse groups of patients and clients.[82] Occupational therapy assistants view their role as important to back up professional staff.[76] However, they also felt that they were taken for granted or that their role was devalued and underlying resentment was apparent.[76]

General practice

Health assistants are used in many settings, including general practice, allowing qualified staff more time to treat and manage complex conditions. Within general practice, there are concerns around the training for this role and the place of assistants in the general practice workforce.[74] Benefits of assistants in general practice included reducing waiting times, easier appointment access, extended general physician consultation time, and additional time for qualified staff to deal with complex cases. Development and employment of assistants was thought to provide benefits to the whole primary care workforce.[74]

Nursing

A literature review identified some of the roles nursing assistants undertook in healthcare settings: these included practical nursing tasks such as bathing and emotional support, allowing professional nurses to spend more time on medication, therapeutic tasks and paperwork, which the nurses generally appreciate.[74] It has also been found that assistants may take on additional tasks during periods of low staffing, but discontinue these activities when staffing levels return to normal.[74] There have also been reports of assistants taking on tasks outside their scope of practice, such as electrocardiogram tracings, taking blood, dressing wounds, and monitoring blood glucose levels and administering drugs without supervision.[74] A qualitative study investigating how health assistants perceived their role was performed. Health assistants saw their role as a supportive one, acting as a communicative link between the patient and nurse, and that through conducting their activities nurses had additional time to focus on therapeutic activities. There appeared to be uncertainty about the roles each group had from both groups.[83]

Lay health advisors

A systematic review was conducted to determine how lay health advisors have been used within Hispanic/Latino communities within the United States. It was found in the review that lay health advisors had different periods of training, ranging from 6-160 hours, with their primary roles being the recruitment and support of data collection, acting as health advisors, referral sources, being role models, distributing materials and advocating on behalf of

community members. The 37 studies included in the review were largely of low quality, but there was some positive evidence of effectiveness of lay health advisors.[84]

Podiatry

Podiatry assistants carry out a range of tasks, including simple foot care and clerical duties, education and assisting in nail and foot surgery. These assistants have potential if provided with opportunities for education and training. Podiatry assistants may be trained to undertake tasks previously performed by the podiatrist, providing time for the podiatrist to concentrate on specialist areas of care and develop and enhance their own skills.[64] The number of assistants employed in podiatry services and the roles they play varies widely. The most commonly reported tasks for podiatry assistants were nail care and assisting in nail surgery.[85] Despite initial controversy, most podiatrists accept the role of assistants in their workforce and support an increase in their use, and they are now accepted as part of the podiatry team.[64]

Audiology

The concept of utilising support personnel has not been embraced by all within audiology.[86] However, these positions can be of tremendous use to the profession, by increasing accessibility and providing high quality care that is productive and cost efficient, whilst increasing patient satisfaction. These personnel work under the auspices of the audiologist, and after receiving training, are prescribed tasks and supervised by a professional. Despite their proposed benefits, assistants are not widespread in audiology practices. In audiology, the assistant could perform tasks such as analysing and cleaning hearing aids, and completing paperwork, thereby freeing up time for the audiologist to spend time on other complex tasks.[86]

Midwifery

There is a concern regarding the role of assistants in midwifery care, often resulting in a heated debate about their use. Concern exists that they will encroach on areas which were once only the domain of the midwife, eroding the midwifery role.[87] However, due to staff shortages, they are increasingly required in midwifery care. Reliance on assistants and the role they play differs amongst hospitals, with some of their tasks including observations antenatal and postnatal, and meconium observations on neonates.[87] One study found that assistants carry out more indirect care activities than direct care activities, and they also assisted staff in a number of activities in line with their training and job description.[88]

Radiography

Due to the shortage of radiographers, there has been discussion that assistants can play a role in radiology services.[89,90] A questionnaire was used to determine the views of radiology service managers on assistants using ionising radiations. There was agreement amongst the managers that assistants need training to undertake examinations using ionising radiations. Duties that support staff could undertake were highlighted, and examinations they could perform were noted. Chest and extremity examinations were the most common examinations named that support workers could undertake. Support workers should have the opportunity to continue training and to qualify as state registered radiographers.[90]

Intensive care

A survey was conducted amongst senior clinical nurses from intensive care units who were asked to identify what tasks health assistants undertook. Assistants were shown to perform an array of different tasks, which were not consistent across settings. Training and remuneration for health assistants also varied. The assistants were noted as playing a valuable supportive role within the intensive care unit.[91]

Speech pathology

Speech and language pathology assistants have been utilised more frequently in recent years, due to the demand for expanding services and to contain costs.[92] The speech language pathology assistants do not replace clinicians, but rather act to support clinical services and provide more time for the clinician, and allow them to extend their services.[92] A case study reported the opinions of speech and language therapists on working with assistants. The speech and language therapists reported a number of advantages and disadvantages for working with speech and language therapy assistants. Advantages included expanding clientele, saving time, reduced labour cost, and being less isolated. Disadvantages included time demands when starting to work with assistants, risks/problems in assistants performing tasks not within their scope, inability of assistants to handle complex cases, difficulty delivering and monitoring therapy accordingly, less opportunities to build relationship with clients, their use may create perceptions that anyone can deliver the therapy, and undermining the complexity of planning and preparation.[93]

Operating room

A pilot project was developed to determine the role of assistants in the operating room, and to enable nurses further time to spend in direct patient care. In the operating room, assistants are primarily responsible for cleaning and transporting patients. Nurses were found to be dissatisfied with the amount of time spent in non-clinical tasks. The project mapped what tasks nurses were performing that could be allocated to supportive personnel, a new position was created (allowing assistants career advancement opportunities) and training programs designed. The position was advertised and training undertaken. Nurses were pleased with the addition of the new role, and assistants were incorporated into the operating room workflow model.[62]

Multidisciplinary support

It was identified that assistant roles are not always linked to the support of only one profession, but can be multidisciplinary.[9] The rehabilitation therapy assistant is an example of this, with the assistant working in the rehabilitation setting undertaking nursing, physiotherapy and occupational therapy related tasks.[36]

Promoting inclusion in models of care

There is current inconsistency in the roles and tasks that health assistants undertake.[1, 38] Alternative models of care that utilise increased numbers of assistants have been seen as a way to address the increasing pressures on healthcare systems today.[94] Often, assistants are not acknowledged in trans-disciplinary models of teamwork,[36] and it can be difficult to form functioning teams when they comprise persons with different levels of education and experience.[95] There were a number of articles that discussed strategies to promote the inclusion of assistants in models of care. Education has been highlighted as essential component for the successful implementation of new models,[96] and clear role delineation appears to be an aspect of delivering successful programs.[95,72] Some of these strategies are discussed below. However, it must be noted that due to differences in workforce characteristics, it is difficult to apply findings generated from one healthcare setting to another.[69] There is still a need for further research on the role of health assistants within rehabilitation and how they can be incorporated into multidisciplinary teams.[97]

Regardless of the model used, communication and delegation to support staff are integral parts of delivering care.[94] Using SBAR (situation, background, assessment, recommendation), a communication mnemonic was found very useful by paraprofessional staff when dealing with professional staff, and this improved communication between staff.[98]

Nursing

A new model of care utilising assistants in nursing (AIN) was used in an Australian haemodialysis unit, due in part to a severe shortage of specialist trained nurses in this setting. The AINs were employed to assist the registered nurse in the dialysis unit, with the aim to

promote and enhance their role under the direct supervision of a registered nurse. The senior nurses in the unit brainstormed what roles could be allocated to the AINs, and then developed a training program, prepared the current staff for their inclusion through training, and then recruited the AINs. The model used was described as a successful and transferable process to address staff shortages and promote recruitment of dialysis nurses.[69]

Surveys were used to determine the amount of time registered nurses and certified nursing assistants spent on tasks during a shift. The results identified that registered nurses were spending 12% of their time performing activities that assistants could perform.[99] Performing simple surveys such as this can provide administrators with knowledge of staffing needs and acuity levels.[99]

One article described the development of a new care delivery model, which was borne out of frustration with the current inefficient practice model that they were using. A team met to create a new model based on having the right person perform the right task. This new model clearly defined the registered nurse and assistant roles, which led to improvement in job satisfaction, increased clarity regarding expectations, and enhanced role identity.[6]

A comparative correlational study compared nursing quality outcomes between two different models; one comprising regulated staff (registered nurses and registered practical nurses) and the other containing regulated and unregulated staff (registered nurses and unregulated workers). The quality of care delivered by regulated and unregulated workers was perceived as lower. Registered nurses reported higher levels of job satisfaction when working with unregulated workers. In both models, there were high levels of role conflict.[100]

Different staff mix models for nursing were examined in a literature review. The authors found a wide variation in models in the literature, with a range of assistive roles described, which could be broken down into roles with a patient care focus, and patient unit focus. Different models existed within the patient care assistive roles, with nurse extender models, partnership models, nurse extender partnership models and associated care delivery redesign approaches. The authors recommended education for the nurse regarding managing, coordinating, supervising and delegation.[101]

Health institutions may make the mistake of underestimating the complexity of introducing models of care with certified nursing assistants.[102] Health administrations should make a commitment to address all barriers that may arise, and plan for these, particularly ones regarding existing personnel and the consequences to their role, satisfaction, sense of trust and sense of competency.[102] There must be empathy regarding these human factors and communication regarding the introduced changes. Action groups should be formed comprising both assistants and nurses to problem solve and review quality.[102] Some of the barriers to effective implementation include the role changes, particularly taking away aspects of holistic patient care from the nurse as they spend less time at the bedside, and their role changes to supervising and coordinating ancillary personnel, which can cause resentment and resistance.[102] Administrators need to actively involve staff in redefining the approach to care; which can be done in small group sessions.[102] Role clarity is important, and can be defined through sessions with nurses describing how tasks should get done, and what to delegate.[102] Teamwork is integral, as is fostering a team environment, and making sure there isn't an "us vs them" atmosphere. One strategy to address this is for registered nurses to act as nurse assistants for the day, or for nurse assistants to shadow registered nurses for a day, so they can live in each other's shoes.[102] Competencies of nursing assistants must be clear, and training to achieve these competencies needs to be provided. Teams members should respect and recognise the contribution each make according to their responsibilities, which shouldn't be overlooked – this can be achieved by rewards or a sincere thank you. Finally, systems should be put in place to ensure quality and to monitor feedback.[102]

One issue that may arise with the introduction of assistants is that as professional staff have difficulties limiting and defining their role, they have trouble delegating tasks to assistants, which results in the professional staff performing anything and everything.[103] A

recommendation by the authors was to clearly define the role of both levels of worker so that they can work together to provide care and understand each others' roles.[103]

Dentistry

Due to the oral health crisis existing in the United States, different models of the allied dental workforce have emerged to address shortcomings of the current workforce to provide greater access to oral healthcare. These were outlined in a report as the advanced dental hygiene practitioner (masters level education), the community dental health coordinator, and the dental health aide therapist. Each of these positions requires training from 18 months to two years, and has different preventative, treatment and restorative capacities. All of these models recognise the role of all members of the oral health team and focus on providing broader oral health care.[104]

Physiotherapy

One setting found the introduction of a physical therapy assistant improved patient outcomes remarkably in a critical care setting. In this setting, the assistant follows the plan of the physical therapist, and works closely with the patient's nurse as a member of the critical care team.[70] The work environment should be structured in such a way that the physiotherapist and the assistant work in close proximity to each other, so that the physiotherapist is available if the need for consultation arises, and they can remain in control of patient care.[4]

Occupational therapy

To promote teamwork between occupational therapists and assistants, and to facilitate appropriate utilisation of support personnel, the following recommendations were made in one article:[105]

- Supervision and creative partnerships should be provided as additional course content when introducing role delineation by educators.
- Educators should provide fieldwork opportunities to develop entry level supervisory skills.
- Occupational therapists should evaluate current tasks performed and determine how support personnel can be used.
- Assistants should identify and pursue areas for further development, effectively communicate role delineation between advanced and entry level assistants, and demonstrate their commitment to the profession.

One method identified in the systematic review to establish health assistants as a recognised delegated clinical role and promote their inclusion in models of care was collaboration during clinical learning. A model has been developed to provide occupational therapy and occupational therapy assistance students with the opportunity to develop a relationship. This model allows them to interact, work as teams and collaborate during education. After using this partnering model, it is expected that assistants and occupational therapists will be able to work more effectively with each other due to their past experiences.[106] In order to create an optimal working environment, and be able to deliver effective care to clients, a partnering relationship needs to be established between the occupational therapy assistant and occupational therapist.[106]

A qualitative study was performed to determine the factors that need to be addressed before extending the role of occupational therapy support workers. Five major factors were identified, these were to increase role clarity, lessen role threat, review organisational effectiveness, ensure clear delegation, and design and implement responsive training programs.[107]

Speech language therapy

The following essential factors were noted for increasing use of speech language therapy assistants: a need for adequate planning and supervision time, training to match assistant's abilities, awareness of clients to the difference in roles between assistants and speech language therapists, careful selection of client base to receive therapy from assistants, and

the danger of lessening intrinsic rewards for therapists. However, therapists may find it satisfying to help develop assistants' skills.[93]

Delegation

Delegation was highlighted as an important issue for professional staff when working with assistants, with appropriate and effective delegation able to promote the inclusion of assistants in models of care. Despite this, delegation and supervision are generally not very well understood,[9] and professionals may not be prepared to delegate tasks.[108, 109] Many new graduates particularly were not adequately prepared with the skills to delegate, and it was found that 'training to delegate skills' or use assistants effectively was at best scanty and mostly non-existent.[76] It is therefore pivotal to ensure that delegation is taught and practised by pre-entry health professional students, as it is often hard to hand over responsibility to another person.[4, 110] There are also issues with role confusion, which can result in ineffective delegation, causing the model of care to be less than effective.[102] When delegating tasks to assistants, health professionals need to take into account the training and competence of the assistant, the complexity of the task, supervision, and their own professional judgement.[9] Delegation frameworks have been developed to assist health professionals when deciding on the allocation of tasks to assistants, and may be a useful strategy to include assistants in models of care.[5, 9]

Nursing

A study found that a delegation exercise improved student's knowledge on delegation. The authors recommended that delegation be taught early in nursing curricula, and applied in classroom and clinical settings.[110] By teaching delegation early and preparing students to be ready to delegate when they enter the workforce, it may promote the inclusion of health assistants in models of care.

A survey found that following delegation by a licensed nurse to practice nurses, positive events occurred when there was routine observation, and negative events occurred when there was no direct observation. The authors acknowledged a need for delegation to be taught to the nurses in supervisory positions. This can take place in the classroom, at orientation or during ongoing education.[111]

One location used a teambuilding retreat as a way to integrate assistants into their units. At the retreat, groups were formed to plan care around a scenario, and they discussed delegation for appropriate personnel. Ground rules were established to build trust. Expectations of the roles were discussed, which were then shared. The retreat resulted in increased morale and respect amongst staff.[112]

The nursing assessment decision grid has been used to provide direction to the registered nurse when deciding whether or not to delegate a task, by allowing the nurse to evaluate total patient care needs.[108, 109] A study was performed to assess the effectiveness of the nursing assessment decision grid to teach delegation skills to registered nurses. Following exposure to the tool, a statistically significant increase resulted in the ability of registered nurses to identify nursing tasks and patient problems, and improve delegation decisions based on patient vignettes.[109] A delegation decision tool may be one strategy to promote the inclusion of health assistants in models of care, and to ensure they are utilised to their full potential.

Physiotherapy

Saunders (1996)[5] presented a functional model of delegation for physiotherapists to consider when delegating tasks to assistants, with the aim of producing benefits for patients and systems. The model presented follows a systematic approach, and is presented as a flow chart. The first step is to analyse the service needs and staff competencies. The next step is to establish levels of delegation, and the suitability of tasks to be delegated. The following step is to determine if there is a cost benefit in delegating the activity. Once this is done, teams need to be organised and staff trained in the tasks to be delegated, and plan how to

communicate the delegated tasks. Finally, the environment needs to be organised and the task undertaken.[4,5] Tasks that can be delegated are conceptualised as those which involve the use of movement controls and are skills based or rule based (such as ultrasound application), while physiotherapists perform tasks that require perceptual (mobilisation/manipulation), intellectual (diagnosing, planning treatment) and expertise skills (diagnosing uncommon conditions). This can relieve the physiotherapist from routine tasks and lead to job enrichment for both physiotherapists and physiotherapy assistants[4] In order to assist in the communication of delegation, performance aids, such as 'helper cards' can be provided to assistants, which have written instructions on them.[4]

Conclusion

There is an acknowledged need for changed models of care within health systems, including the expansion and substitution of roles for those at the assistant level. Despite this, there are barriers to incorporating assistants in models of care. These may include lack of clarity regarding roles, and negative perceptions of assistants by professionals. This may be due to the wide variety in the range of tasks and roles that assistants fill in current health systems across professions and areas of care. Strategies have been used to promote the inclusion of assistants in models of care, including education/training programs, communication tools, consultation with staff, and collaborative learning. Issues with delegation in models of care with assistants were also identified in the review, and it was found many professionals were inadequately prepared or did not have the skills to delegate tasks. To address this, education programs were conducted, and functional models of delegation created to assist professionals. Policymakers can, by introducing strategies such as those outlined above, address the barriers to incorporating assistants into models of care and ensure they are recognised as a delegated clinical role.

Recommendations for practice

From the included studies in the literature review component of this review for question 2, the following recommendations have been made, all of which are assigned a grade and a level of evidence according to the Joanna Briggs institute Levels of Evidence and Grades of Recommendation (Appendix 6).

- The evidence suggests that a clear framework for delegation amongst staff coupled with education on 'delegation skills' can facilitate inclusion of assistants in models of care. (Level 4) (Grade B)
- The evidence suggests that communication mnemonics can facilitate necessary interaction between allied health assistants and allied health professionals. (Level 4) (Grade B)
- The evidence suggests that, in planning for the inclusion of health assistants in models of care, the variety of barriers and obstacles that exist in the workplace must be considered. (Level 4) (Grade B)

12. Literature Review on Question 3: Effective/appropriate strategies to promote consistency and standardisation of vocational training delivered to health assistants

The need to standardise

A common theme in the literature was the need to standardise the training provided to assistants.[79, 113] Currently, the training that assistants receive is often variable[52,74, 114] and in many areas assistants may receive little or no training. Costs of training and the time taken for training vary widely, and there is often no national regulation of training, despite support for this.[115] National vocational qualifications for assistants have received support as they provide recognition for previously demonstrated skills and commitment.[116] As consumers of healthcare, 'patients deserve to be served by a qualified and appropriately credentialed work force.'.[(p.116)117] Within nations, standardised training will enable qualifications to be transferable across states. This can currently act as a barrier to employment for those who have undertaken training in different locations. [118] In Australia, in an effort to promote consistency and national standardisation of VET delivered to health assistants, the Certificate III and IV in Allied Health Assistance has been developed. In the Australian VET sector, qualifications are provided based on either nationally endorsed competency standards or on standards developed by relevant professional, industry, enterprise or community groups.[17] These VET training packages offer a consistent and standard approach to training allied health assistants via mandatory components incorporating competencies, assessment and a predefined framework for qualification. National vocational qualifications for assistants have received support as they provide recognition for previously demonstrated skills and knowledge,[116] and they address the ideal that 'patients deserve to be served by a qualified and appropriately credentialed work force.'. [(p.116)117]

Despite the acknowledged need, there was minimal literature addressing strategies to promote consistency and standardisation of vocational training delivered to health assistants. Below is a narrative summary of this literature.

Pharmacy

Pharmacy technicians play an important role in supporting pharmacists, and it seems as if their role will keep expanding into the future. Due to the importance of their role, technicians must function 'in accordance with acceptable standards for education, training, certification, and regulatory oversight.'[(p.116)] A single standard for education, training and certification is necessary for technicians, as there are considerable flaws with having multiple accreditation standards, including: confusing the public, not ensuring minimum competencies, and not promoting delegation, which would allow pharmacists to spend additional time to deliver patient care.[117] When developing the standards for technicians, this needs to be performed in a not-for-profit environment by the pharmacy profession.[117]

Speech and language pathology

In the United States, although there are guidelines that have been developed regarding training, credentialing, using and supervising speech and language pathology assistants, there is discrepancy between states regarding the level of regulation and education for assistants, with some states not even allowing their use.[92]

Physiotherapy

A survey was conducted to determine the current utilisation of physical therapy support personnel in Canada. The survey identified that support workers received a minimal amount of on the job training. The authors recommended that standardised programs be established for support workers, with minimal education standards.[63] The frequency and quality of training for physiotherapy assistants varies, with most initial training being on the job. On-going training did occur in the UK, but varied from ad hoc in services to structured programs.[41]

Within Australia, the Australian Physiotherapy Council guidelines for physiotherapists working with assistants provide recommendations for education and training of assistants and aides, and also recommend a set of topics that needs to be included in education programs at a minimum.[10] These are: infection control, manual handling, basic medical terminology, emergency procedures, ethics, communication skills, and workplace specific skills/competencies.[10]

Occupational therapy

In the United States, training for occupational therapy assistants has moved from 12 week training programs to two year accredited college degrees or professional certificate program. Further education for occupational therapy assistants now exist in the form of career ladders, continuing education, developing specialty skills, or pursuing professional level degrees in occupational therapy. [81] Accreditation standards exist for occupational therapy assistant educational programs in the United States, with educational programs being granted an accreditation status based on the extent to which they comply with the standards.[119]

Strategies to maintain consistency

Nursing

For certified nursing assistants (CNAs) in nursing homes working in the United States there exist mandatory training requirements to become qualified for their job. This consists of 75 hours of initial training, 16 hours of supervised clinical training, and 12 hours of continual education annually. Some states require additional training to the figures named above. A survey was conducted to determine what the CNAs considered was required in their training, and where further training was needed. The authors concluded that the findings from the survey could inform policy makers, educators and providers to make changes to their training to address the needs of CNAs.[117]

Rehabilitation

In the UK, a national framework for therapy support worker education and development has been set up, which offers guidance for continuing professional development. This was created as a joint collaboration between the Chartered Society of Physiotherapists and the College of Occupational Therapists,[120] and can be used to standardise training programs.

Foundation degrees have been introduced as a strategy to address the need for a more standardised approach to education for support workers. Foundation degrees aim to provide students with 'a combination of the work skills, academic knowledge and transferable skills that employers require.'[(p.504), 52] The credit rating of the degree equals year 1 and 2 of undergraduate courses, providing 120 academic credits at level 1 and an additional 120 at level 2.[52] Foundation degrees, which are said to provide 'an ideal framework for the development of education for the assistant workforce.'[(p.505)] have a set of key features. These include: employer involvement, development of skills specific to the needs of the workplace, work based learning, credit ratings providing academic worth, progression within work or providing an opportunity to progress with further study, and being a degree in its own right (graduate qualification).[52]

In the United States, physical therapy assistant courses are accredited by the Commission on Accreditation in Physical therapy Education. To gain their license, physical therapy assistants must pass a national licensing exam, the National Physical Therapy Examination. A survey found that those who passed the exam were more likely from newer, public programs, with a higher ratio of clinical education. Curricula should therefore include adequate time for physical therapy assistants to meet required competencies.[121]

There are moves to standardise assessment in clinical education. One study described the development and testing of physical therapist and physical therapy assistant clinical performance instruments to create uniform processes and instruments to assess clinical performance of students.[122]

Midwifery

Training for midwifery support workers seems to be on an ad hoc basis. Uptake of national Vocational Qualification programs in the UK is 'patchy,' perhaps due to the focus of the awards not meeting the needs of maternity care. A project was conducted to 'assess the role of the support worker in maternity care and develop a training package in line with the government agenda of developing talents and lifelong learning.[(p.72),] The group identified the role of the midwifery care assistant, and developed a course dependent on their role. Not all aspects of the role were agreed upon; although there was consensus on most issues. A program was thus developed that provided a standardised generic training package.[87]

Speech and language pathology

Due to this variation in education and regulation, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association has established criteria regarding the training and registration of assistants, and has an approval process for associate degree assistant technical training programs.[92] This national approval process will set a gold standard for programs to reach, which will send a clear message that there are certain standards that speech and language pathology assistants need to meet. In addition, having an approval process will strengthen the profession, and provide official recognition of assistants, with clearly defined roles. When doing fieldwork on-site, the program outlines 'specific ethical behaviours and applied skills to be developed.[(p.23)92,] The program will provide high quality, consistent training, providing credibility and expectations of high quality performance by speech language pathologist assistants.[92]

Conclusion

There is widespread agreement regarding the need to promote consistency and standardisation of vocational training delivered to health assistants. Despite this, there is a dearth of literature focusing on strategies to do so. However, there are promising signs, with different organisations creating guidelines, standards and accreditation processes for assistant training courses. In Australia, this is not so much of an issue, as standardisation of training has been introduced through the introduction of the Certificate III and IV in Allied Health Assistance.

Recommendations for practice

From the included studies in the literature review component of this review for question 3, the following recommendation has been made, which is assigned a grade and a level of evidence according to the Joanna Briggs institute Levels of Evidence and Grades of Recommendation (Appendix 6).

- The evidence suggests that national standards allow recognition of qualifications and competencies associated with them across states. (Level 4) (Grade B)

13. Literature Review on Question 4: Effective/appropriate strategies to adapt vocational training programs to local contexts in healthcare

There was a lack of literature regarding effective or appropriate strategies to adapt vocational training programs to the local context in healthcare. Following is a summary of papers where educational courses and programs were implemented according to the unique context of the setting.

International examples

Iran has developed their own system of training for nurses. In addition to the registered nurse, there exists the associated nurse assistant (Komak Behyar), who provides basic nursing tasks following a short, 2-6 month vocational training course, to the nurse assistant (Behyar). The nurse assistant is trained through a one year curriculum if passing a competitive exam for entry, or a three year curriculum for first year high school students. In some areas, the Behyar are the primary nursing workforce.[123]

In North Carolina, there is a shortage of direct care workers, and high rates of turnover in these positions. There is also a significant projected need for future direct care workers which will not be met by current growth levels (as of 2004).[124] In an effort to address recruitment and retention issues, two new job categories were created: a medication aide and a geriatric nurse aide, which provide opportunities for career advancement for paraprofessionals. They have also established a voluntary program which provides incentives for completing training and agreeing to stay with their employers for certain time limits.[124]

An article outlined the success of an undergraduate program for occupational therapy support personnel which could be conducted by staff part-time whilst still employed. This program, developed in Bristol, was developed in part due to the national shortage of occupational therapists, and to meet local needs as well.[11] In Bristol, although there was a shortage in occupational therapists, there was no shortage of support personnel. The program, by encouraging support workers to become occupational therapists, would address the shortage by obliging the students to work in the region, and due to family and work ties, they would not be swayed to leave once qualified. This program has contributed to reducing the number of occupational therapy vacancies in the region.[11]

An article outlined the development of a training program for rehabilitation aides in Haiti, along with the successes, challenges and dilemmas that were encountered through the provision of this program.[125] The aim of the program was to address the need for long-term rehabilitative care for disabled persons within Port-au-Prince in Haiti, as there are not enough healthcare professionals to meet needs. The course consists of 6 months course work and 3 months of field experience. A survey of graduates found that improvements could be made to the course, including helping students find employment following graduation, lack of support from healthcare providers providing continued training, and a need for base nursing skill and first aid-education. The authors recommend that similar programs must be culturally sensitive and specific, provide continuing education and help create employment opportunities.[125]

An article outlined the development and delivery of a series of educational conferences for auxiliary maternity nurses in the Dominican Republic due to the high maternal mortality rate there.[126] This curriculum developed was previously didactic, and continuing education had no effect on changing quality of care. The new curriculum was participatory and dialogic, informed by empowerment education and adult learning methods. Following the program, there were positive behavioural changes on the participants. The findings of the study suggest that the education program may contribute to a reduction in maternal mortality.[126]

In North Dakota, which is a frontier state with urban communities spread over vast distances, those seeking mental health services are often required to travel considerable differences to access providers.[127] A project was established using natural caregivers and a train-the-trainer model to provide education to support workers, which promoted information in the community across the state. The train-the-trainer model appeared successful and was used due to the rural nature of the state and lack of specialists.[127]

An article describes the development and implementation of an occupational therapy assistant training course in Barbados.[128] The course was developed to meet the dire need for occupational therapy services, and was developed in the context of the eastern Caribbean region. The course was developed with a foreign consultant from an international organisation and a local professional, to create a course suited to the region. To do this, the following factors were taken into account; the course needed to be culturally appropriate, provided at a feasible cost, delivered with limited trainers, relevant to the job description, and independently functioning due to the limited number of trained occupational therapists.[128]

Australian examples

An article described the development of a curriculum for Aboriginal community health workers in remote South Australia. The aim was to develop a culturally oriented curriculum, and was therefore created in conjunction with aboriginal health workers, their teachers and communities.[129] Due to current views on Aboriginal health workers held by the Aboriginal community, where many are not trusted and undermine their abilities, the aim was to redefine their role, and generate appreciation for their functions. To do this, meetings were held over a nine month period, which were single-sex when discussing issues related to venereal disease and birth in deference to local cultural norms. Health workers were allowed to progress at their own pace. Teaching methods and content are designed to meet the needs of the health workers, which encourage Aboriginal involvement.[129]

A project report outlined the development and evaluation of a program aimed at training rural and remote therapy assistants in Western Australia. These therapy assistants deliver programs based on the direction of allied health professionals, and are used to deliver services to address the needs of rural and remote communities. The use of therapy assistants is seen as an effective strategy to improve access to allied health services in rural and remote areas, as they provide continuity of care and ongoing client management, build skills within the community, and work across a number of settings.[130] The training for therapy assistants in Western Australia is normally on the job, provided by supervising allied health professionals, which can place demands on their time. The course was developed to meet the needs for training based on a survey that had been distributed to both therapy assistants and allied health professionals. The training could be used as a credit towards a recognised qualification due to a partnership with a registered training provider. The training was developed to be delivered by videoconference and in other forms (such as CD-ROM) for those who could not attend teleconferences. The training consisted of stand alone packages, adapted for distance learning. Overall, there was a high level of attendance and high satisfaction with the program. This training reduced the work required for allied health professionals in their role as trainers. The authors conclude that this training approach is relevant for other health services who deliver similar models of delivery.[130]

Conclusion

Despite the need for evidence regarding appropriate and effective strategies to adapt vocational training programs to local contexts in healthcare, there was a lack of literature on this topic. However, from the few papers on this topic, it can be found that training does need to be contextualised at times for local contexts, and this may need to take into account (depending on the setting) population spread and rural health, cultural issues, developing countries, and local healthcare shortages.

Recommendations for practice

From the included studies in the literature review component of this review for question 4, the following recommendations have been made, both of which are assigned a grade and a level of evidence according to the Joanna Briggs institute Levels of Evidence and Grades of Recommendation (Appendix 6).

- The evidence suggests that community and participant consultation can facilitate development and provision of VET programs that are appropriate to the local context. (Level 4) (Grade B)
- The evidence suggests that when contextualising programs for certain locations, population spread, cultural issues, and local healthcare needs all need to be taken into account. (Level 4) (Grade B)