



Job satisfaction of therapy radiographers in the UK: Results of a phase I qualitative study

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Abstract *Background:* Department of Health (DoH) vacancy data for radiography have been consistently higher than other allied health professions. In radiotherapy there has been ongoing concern about recruitment and retention. It is therefore useful to consider what elements of the job and the work environment influence job satisfaction and intentions to leave in therapy radiographers (therapists), in order to stem any future losses from the profession.

Aim: To identify and explore the current and developing roles and responsibilities of therapists and the impact of these factors on job satisfaction.

Design: An interpretive study utilising unstructured interviews with qualified practitioners was undertaken across three radiotherapy centres in England. A Grounded Theory approach was utilised within a case study design.

Setting and participants: Three radiotherapy centres were the focus of this phase I study. Centres were geographically close but with historically different vacancy rates (based on the DoH vacancy data). A total of 18 therapists across a range of grades and experience participated in the one to one interviews.

Results: From the interviews, factors which influence job satisfaction fall under three main headings: job design, leadership and organisational governance, and stress or burnout. A preliminary model is proposed to explain how job satisfaction changes with level of responsibility (which is primarily linked to job design and opportunities for autonomy) and job-tenure. Leadership and aspects of organisational governance (such as perceived fairness in application of departmental policies) and stress or burnout appear to moderate job satisfaction and leaving intentions.

Conclusion: This study provides some preliminary qualitative data to help managers design retention strategies. These strategies should initially focus on job redesign, development of appropriate leadership qualities in those within supervisory roles and minimising opportunities for stress and burnout. This data will be tested in a wider quantitative survey phase.

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Background to the current vacancy problem

Vacancy rates for therapy radiographers (or radiation therapists) have long been problematical and were reported as 17% for 2004.¹ Staffing radiotherapy departments have recently become easier (financial constraints and job cuts may mask current shortages) but a significant problem remains.

Greater numbers of staff are required to treat increasing patient numbers with the aging population and greater utilisation of radiotherapy for some cancers^{2–4} and establishments have risen faster than training outputs. Overall attrition of around 3% per annum is seen.¹ Policy initiatives such as the introduction of patient centred services, new roles and blurring of professional boundaries all have the potential to affect job satisfaction with subsequent effects on turnover and retention.^{5–8}

The importance of accurate staffing levels for therapists was highlighted by Griffiths in 2000⁹ including planning for training related to the constantly changing technical environment and increased cognitive task load. For example, the number of cognitive checking tasks with asymmetric fields increases by 80% compared with symmetrical fields.⁹ The increased cognitive load per patient carries a greater potential for treatment error and consequently greater stress for the radiographers involved in treatment delivery. It is essential that further knowledge is gained about the factors that contribute to job satisfaction to reduce turnover. A diminished workforce has substantial effects on the ability to provide an adequate cancer service, particularly the ability to meet waiting time targets. Movement of staff between departments is a healthy way to ensure departments keep moving forward with the introduction of new ideas or perspectives. However, where turnover is high there may be substantial costs in training and development during induction and orientation periods, and loss of senior staff may have a significant impact on the ability to maintain a safe service.

Hence identifying the factors that influence job satisfaction is important. Job satisfaction is a precursor to turnover and is predictive of employee behaviour. Job dissatisfaction can lead to employee withdrawal and voluntary exit from the establishment.¹⁰ The variable 'propensity to leave' or 'turnover intention' is closely associated with actual turnover.¹⁰ A literature review¹¹ identified evidence (some from health professions) about job design, the working environment (including the possibility of burnout) and leadership qualities that influence job satisfaction in other fields, and informed understanding of job satisfaction and turnover intentions. No published research on radiation therapists in the UK existed until this study into job satisfaction which attempts to corroborate findings from similar professional fields. Experiences of therapists from a range of backgrounds and job-tenure add to the richness and applicability of our data which managers and policy makers can use to inform retention strategies and their own work satisfaction surveys.

The study

This is phase I of a multi-phase investigation into the factors that influence job satisfaction and turnover intentions. The

primary aim was to identify and explore the current and developing roles and responsibilities of therapists and the impact of these factors on job satisfaction. The secondary aim was to determine the characteristics of the work environment and conditions that can be changed to enhance work satisfaction and reduce turnover. The study also tried to answer the following:

1. Does job satisfaction change with grade (or experience)?
2. Do those in specialist roles experience different levels of job satisfaction?
3. What is the impact of the working environment on therapist's intentions to leave?
4. What is the impact of critical incidents on therapist's intentions to leave their post (or the profession)?
5. What aspects of radiotherapy work are the most influential for determining job satisfaction?

A model to explain some of the aspects that contribute to a therapist's job satisfaction (and turnover intentions) was a primary outcome.

Study design and data collection

Independent scientific review of the study at Sheffield Hallam University preceded NHS ethics approval. Research governance approval was granted by participating centres and all participants gave written consent before participating.

A case study design was adopted using three geographically close NHS radiotherapy departments. Two of the three departments were in a region with historically high vacancy rates according to the Department of Health (DoH) data (for example, 11.4% for 2002), compared with a much lower regional vacancy rate for centre 3 (for example, 5.5% for 2002).¹² This difference provided an opportunity to investigate potential differences in work design or organisational differences which may be influential (recognising that factors other than turnover influence vacancies).

An interpretive design was adopted, using Grounded Theory¹³ within the Glazer tradition¹⁴ to ensure the model proposed was grounded in the data developed from participants. Individual comments are used to further validate the concepts proposed.

Individual one to one unstructured interviews were held with participants at their workplace with interview durations between 30 min and 1 h. Some questions were prepared in advance to serve as prompts for later interviews (see Fig. 1). Following opening questions participants were asked to reflect on a time when they felt happy at work. The direction of the interview was determined by the comments made by participants and evolved as the interview progressed (the questions in Fig. 1 were not followed rigidly and subsequent questions reflected the topics raised by individuals).

Sampling

Staff at participating centres was invited to a presentation about the aims of the study, and information sheets were

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