

The role of a '*nurse specialist*' in traumatic brain injury

Molly Hilling
Lead Nurse for Brain Injury
Barts Health NHS Trust

What is a nurse specialist?

'an advanced registered nurse with specialised skills, knowledge, and experience in a specific area'

But what skills are required?

What should we know?

Experience of what?

Why do we need this role?
Where are the gaps?

Finding foundations in
overwhelming uncertainty

Clinical care is strong, but
communication and
translation absent

Should we always blindly
follow the advice of
clinicians?

The background is a solid purple color. It features several decorative elements: a cluster of white dots in the top-left corner, a larger, irregularly shaped area of white dots in the top-center, a solid purple abstract shape in the top-right, a solid purple abstract shape in the middle-left, and another cluster of white dots in the bottom-left.

Does everyone get equal opportunities
and access to rehabilitation?

“Is recovery determined by whether you have someone at your side?”

With family support

Emotional anchor during acute care
Practical help with rehab routines and appointments
Advocacy in care decisions: asking questions, pushing for clarity
Continuity of encouragement and monitoring at home

Without family support

Greater risk of isolation and anxiety
Difficulty navigating complex systems alone
Reduced adherence to rehab plans
Fewer opportunities for advocacy and empowerment

Failures in equality:

Geographic disparities: rural patients face limited rehab services and long travel distances.

Socioeconomic barriers: financial strain, employment status, and housing instability affect access.

Cultural and language gaps: patients may not understand medical information or feel excluded from decisions.

Fragmented pathways: discharge planning assumes smooth transitions, but community services are inconsistent.

Resource shortages: understaffed rehab units, long waiting lists, and lack of specialist training.

'Surrogate' relative

- A nurse specialist can act as the stand-in advocate when family is absent
- Empowering caregivers when family is present- *a relative for a relative*
- Ensuring equity: no patient should be disadvantaged by circumstances- idealistic or achievable?

Advancing clinical skills is not the 'gap' to be filled

- They combine clinical expertise with the ability to translate complex information into language patients and families can understand.
- They act as advocates, ensuring equitable access to rehabilitation and support services.
- They provide holistic care, addressing emotional wellbeing, family dynamics, and long-term recovery needs.
- They serve as navigators, guiding patients through multidisciplinary pathways and connecting them with the right resources at the right time.



Thank you

m.hilling@nhs.net