**Time to take a stand on nurses’ working conditions?**

According to the UK’s Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) at the end of March 2018 there were 690,278 nurses and midwives on their register – 495 fewer than at the end of March 2017. The NMC also reported that 29% more EU nurses left the UK this year than last because of Brexit equating to 3,962 less nurses working in the NHS.1 Overall there are 495 less nurses on the NMC register than there were last year. Registrations have fallen across mental health, learning disability and adult nursing.

No one living in the UK could have failed to notice that there is a nursing workforce crisis caused by multiple factors. This crisis hit in England first but is also beginning to be discussed in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. There are many reasons for this crisis and these are described in detail in the recent Health Select Committee Report.2. A large part of the problem is nurses’ working conditions. By this I don’t just mean pay, although this plays a part and I await the result of the Royal College of Nursing’s (RCN) current ballot on the pay offer with interest.

There is plenty of evidence that nurses are regularly working 14 hour shifts (including 2 hours unpaid overtime) and not getting breaks. This issue was highlighted in the Health Select Committee Report and the Chief Nursing Officers were asked to take a lead on ensuring this was addressed. This issue has been taken up by the RCN. In a civilised society it is unbelievable that the RCN has had to start a campaign to encourage nurses to *Rest, Rehydrate, Refuel*.3 I even heard recently that at least one hospital doesn’t allow nurses to take water bottles on to the ward with them even though they are struggling to take breaks. How can we expect nurses to care for other people if we don’t care for them. So nurses please start taking your breaks. Guidance on strategies to help you do this is available on the RCN website.3

Nurses are also regularly working unpaid overtime and, as stated above, not having time to take their breaks. Thirty years ago, as a newly qualified registered nurse, I asked a nursing officer at a prestigious London teaching hospital if I could have time off in lieu of all the unpaid overtime I had been working she said “it is just part of the job” and that was the end of the conversation. I hope I would be braver if faced with the same situation today. We have all stayed late to ensure our patients get the care they need. However, I think the time has come for nurses to take a stand. Since 2015 several RCN regions have been encouraging its members to claim time off in lieu (TOIL) for the extra hours they are working. I would suggest the time has come to step this campaign up and for all nurses to be recording and submitting the extra hours they work each week. Only by standing together will things change.

Funding for continuous professional development (CPD) has also been cut across the board for nurses and the money provided by the Department of Health and Social Care for 2018/19 has shrunk even further. The Health Select Committee recommended that urgent steps were taken to reinstate CPD funding for nurses as this was one reason nurses were leaving the profession. However, within a couple of weeks of the report being published it was announced that funding for pre-registration postgraduate courses in England was going to be via the student loan company. The fact that students on these courses have to increase their loan (and accrue interest on the loan while on the course– currently at a rate of 6.1%) is putting people off applying for these courses. Numbers of applications for these postgraduate courses are down across the board in England. This is only going to add to the NHS workforce crisis in the longer term.

In an era of virtually non-existent CPD funding, employers need to find innovative ways of funding this education for their staff. This is essential to develop the workforce to meet the needs of the patients as well as potentially increasing retention of staff. A first step in this context is the development of postgraduate career pathways. As well as ensuring employers are not “wasting” money on unnecessary courses these will help nurses identify what education and experience they need to have to progress in their careers. Many organisations are already putting these pathways into place. Potentially these should be developed nationally to ensure that competencies developed in one organisation are recognised in another if a nurse changes job.

So has the time come for nurses to take a stand on working unpaid overtime, not having time to take their breaks and not having funding for CPD? I believe it has. Nurses need to stand together for themselves and the future workforce.

**References**

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