QNI survey reveals jump in district nurse training numbers won’t last

By Louise Hunt

Fresh concerns have been raised over the future of district nursing, as new figures reveal the number qualifying from specialist postgraduate programmes is set to fall despite rising demand for services.

Primary care has seen an increase in the number of nurses undertaking specialist district nursing programmes across the UK in recent years, but this number is expected to tail off, according to the latest Queen’s Nursing Institute (QNI) survey of district nurse education. The survey, published last week, shows the increase in the number of new entrants to courses will drop year on year, from 32.6% for 2014-15 to a predicted 14.3% for 2015-16. Proposals from Health Education England for 2016-17 suggest the number of commissions for specialist district nurse programmes will fall by 0.8%.

QNI chief executive Crystal Oldman said: ‘We find this alarming, particularly given the recent policy focus across the UK on delivering more care in the community. The QNI is concerned that the newly qualified district nurses will not be of sufficient number to meet the increased demand or to replace those due to retire.

‘There remains a critical need to develop a robust workforce plan for district nurses.’

RCN head of nursing practice JP Nolan said: ‘There are grounds to be positive that we will have well over 600 new district nurse specialists training in the current academic year. We are concerned, however, that at a time when the growth should itself be increasing it is on the decline year-on-year, as noted by QNI.’

He added: ‘With the current focus on seven-day care and keeping patients at home, it is essential that education commissioners and workforce planners realise the need for high quality district nursing is expanding exponentially.’

Strretched to the limit

Unite lead professional officer Obi Amadi said the survey results show that workforce planning is ineffective. ‘It seems that district nursing has been a casualty of the budget cuts. At the very least, numbers should be maintained, not decreased,’ she said.

‘There needs to be an investment ahead of the shift to primary care. There is already a shortage of district and general practice nurses, many of whom will soon retire, and they are stretched to the limit.’

She added that the trend towards skill mixing, with an increasing reliance on untrained roles in district nursing teams, is also concerning. ‘If you reduce the level of qualified specialist district nurses you have not got the senior practitioners with the experience to ensure the team is providing good quality care,’ said Ms Amadi.

To access the QNI’s district nurse reports go to tiny.cc/QNI_DNE

Taking palliative care to patients

A rapid response service for patients at the end of life has experienced higher than expected demand in its first months.

The pal@home service, introduced by Guy’s and St Thomas’ NHS Foundation Trust, London, in December, delivers expert nursing care within the hour to patients at home. It runs from 8pm to 8am seven days a week, so patients no longer need to go into hospital in the night or wait until the morning to see their GP. So far, it has received an average of 120 referrals a month, and five to ten calls a night.

‘The main aim is to help people have a good death at home if that is their preference,’ said the service’s deputy head of nursing Karen Titchener. ‘Patients may need urgent symptom control or have a medical problem. We are here to help and support them when they need it.’

Hannah Simmons and Richard Jones of the pal@home service team