DH told to fix UK personnel shortfall while non-EU staff can plug the gap

By Linsey Wynton

The Department of Health has been criticised for its lack of workforce planning and over-reliance on overseas nurses to plug gaps.

The Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) has ‘reluctantly’ agreed to recommend that up to 5,000 non-European Union (EU) nurses can enter the UK to work each year.

MAC chair Sir David Metcalf said foreign nurses are not a long-term solution to nurse recruitment: ‘It is with great reluctance we have decided to put nurses on the list. But we do not want to put the health of the nation at risk.’

In a report published last week, MAC criticised the government for failing to maintain a sufficient supply of UK nurses with no hope of sustainability being fixed.

‘The DH and the trusts view non-EU nurses as a “get out of jail free” card. Really they should be doing more in terms of workforce planning.’

Low pay point

The government has an annual cap of 20,700 non-EU workers in all fields. MAC recommended the recruitment of up to 14,000 overseas nurses in the next four years.

Professor Metcalf found evidence that non-EU nurses are often paid up to £6,000 less per year than British and EU nurses. He told a press conference: ‘I spoke to a recruiter who had been asked to recruit nurses at the lowest pay point.’

MAC concluded that nurse shortages are caused by:

- Pressures on the NHS budget.
- The cutting of training places by almost one fifth in 2009 to 2013.
- Demand for nurses in the care and independent sectors where there is no contribution to nurse training.

Professor Metcalf called for pay reforms saying: ‘The DH seems to have ignored that pay is a factor. The median pay for nurse graduates is £31,500 but it is £39,000 for other graduates.’

He also criticised the government for failing to anticipate nurse shortages and called for flexible working and supplements to discourage many nurses from retiring at 55, the earliest age they can claim an NHS pension.

RCN head of policy and international affairs Howard Catton welcomed the decision and said: ‘We wholeheartedly support the MAC in this. Having nurses on the shortage list has created a supply avenue which we could ill afford to lose in the current climate.’

A Unison spokesperson said trusts would ‘breathe a collective sigh of relief at the announcement’. A DH spokesperson said: ‘We are pleased the MAC has recommended that nurses remain on the occupation shortage list but, at the same time, we are already delivering our plan to train more home-grown nurses.’

The Home Office will now consider the recommendation.

‘NURSES FOR HILLARY’ IN US PRESIDENCY

America’s largest nursing organisation has announced its support for Hillary Clinton to become US president.

American Nurses Association (ANA) president Pamela Cipriano said: ‘Ms Clinton has been a nurse champion and healthcare advocate throughout her career and believes empowering nurses is good for patients and good for the country.’

‘We need a president who will make it a priority to transform the country’s healthcare system into one that is high quality, affordable and accessible.

‘By supporting efforts to improve nurses’ work environments, Ms Clinton shows she understands the impact nursing has on patient outcomes and the quality of care.’

Ms Clinton, who has yet to secure the Democratic party’s presidential nomination, has pledged to protect the Affordable Care Act. She also said she would reduce the cost of prescription medicines and address nursing shortages.

As a senator she supported increased funding for higher education training for nurses and programmes to attract trainee nurses, including improving nurses’ work environments.

The ANA represents 3.4 million nurses.