A ‘wicked’ problem

SENIOR NURSES everywhere are facing a ‘wicked’ problem, wicked in the sense that it seems to defy resolution. The problem is this: the national shortage of nurses, particularly of those at band 5, is forcing us to use agency nurses so that we have enough staff to provide patient care safely.

However, the NHS Trust Development Authority and Monitor are suggesting penalties for those trusts that fail to reduce how much they spend on nursing agency staff to a proportion of their total nursing spend.

For most acute trusts, a hefty proportion of agency spend is on staff to look after ‘special’ patients who are confused or aggressive on a one-to-one basis.

It is not clear why the use of agency staff to care for such special patients has increased but one can speculate about risk aversion, staffing numbers and patient demographics. Whatever the reason, the phenomenon appears to be here to stay.

At Milton Keynes, we have added an extra healthcare assistant per shift to the nursing establishments, so that teams have the numbers to provide one-to-one care where it is really needed. So this is not just about reducing nursing spend; it is also about providing great care to some of the most complex and challenging patients.

We are also following the excellent ‘Make Specialling Special’ programme, established by University Hospitals Birmingham NHS Foundation Trust. This promotes active communication and interaction between patients and nurses, structured accountability handovers, and more. But most of all it stresses that ‘specialling’ should be valued as the highly skilled nursing that it is.

It would be useful though to learn what other senior nurses plan to do; after all, this is most definitely one of the most wicked problems we face.

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