General practice nurses urged to join professional mainstream

Queen’s Nursing Institute tells staff to demonstrate and share their abilities, writes Lynne Pearce

THERE HAS never been a time of greater opportunity for nurses working in general practice, according to a report published last month by the Queen’s Nursing Institute (QNI).

‘This is the moment for practice nurses to demonstrate and share what they do,’ says QNI chief executive Crystal Oldman.

One of the aims of the report was to help employers and policymakers overcome the challenges of transforming primary care and ensure there is a greater variety of local services.

It is based on the findings of an online survey in April last year. Then, the QNI had hoped for at least 1,000 responses, but this figure was exceeded within one week.

‘We had a fantastic response rate, with almost 3,500 practice nurses taking part,’ says Dr Oldman. ‘We think this represents about 15% of the workforce.’

‘These nurses have a story and they trust us to tell it. Timing was also important. There is so much in the mainstream press about primary care, but the attention has been on GPs, not nurses.’

The report, General Practice Nursing in the 21st Century, was inspired by the QNI’s 2020 Vision reports that explored district nursing. The new document offers a comprehensive review of the role of general practice nurses, examining issues such as salary and working hours, line management, professional development, roles and responsibilities, and workload pressures.

With about one third of general practice nurses due to retire by 2020, there is a particularly pressing need to address the potential shortfall, the QNI suggests.

‘We need to develop a robust workforce plan for how we are going to grow the next generation,’ says Dr Oldman.

The report recommends local, regional and national planning to determine how many nurses are needed. As part of its work, the QNI is analysing data regionally to show the local picture in more detail.

Clinical commissioning

Nurse managers working in, or with, clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) can play a pivotal role in recognising how practice nurses deliver services for their populations, says Dr Oldman. She also urges more practice nurses to become involved in their CCGs.

Another important area is the wide variation in terms and conditions for nurses employed in general practice.

‘This is not usually our bag – we’re not a trade union - but the research shows it is an obvious issue,’ says Dr Oldman.

‘There is huge variability, with some nurses being paid at band 4 while others are on band 7. Some nurses told us they had not had pay rises for five years, so when they hear about their colleagues in secondary care getting “just” a 1% increase, they feel even worse.’

One surprising statistic concerns the small number of employers offering placements to nursing students: 27%, compared with more than 61% for medical students.

‘This is part of inspiring students to want to become practice nurses,’ says Dr Oldman. ‘Of course it is unsustainable for every student nurse to spend weeks in a GP surgery, but what we are suggesting is a half to a full day

The institute’s main findings

Carried out over ten weeks from April to June 2015, the Queen’s Nursing Institute’s online survey of general practice nurses attracted 3,405 respondents. The findings show:

- More than 33% of general practice nurses are due to retire by 2020
- More than 22% have two jobs
- Only 35% of respondents thought their salary reflects their role in the practice
- Just more than half, 53%, reported that their employers always support their professional development
- About 43% thought their nursing teams had too few appropriately qualified and trained staff to meet patients’ needs
GP services are ‘reaching breaking point’ as doctors leave and demand rises

Increasingly, investigations and studies paint a gloomy picture for general practices, with the British Medical Association (BMA) describing many as ‘reaching breaking point’.

A BBC investigation has shown that at least 100 surgeries had applied to NHS England for the right to stop accepting new patients in 2014/15, according to a Freedom of Information request. In addition, 299 surgeries have indicated on the NHS Choices website that they are not taking on new patients.

Chair of the BMA general practitioners committee Chaand Nagpaul told the BBC that practices are finding it hard to recruit new doctors.

‘GP services are reaching breaking point as they struggle to cope with rising patient demand, falling resources and a shortage of GPs,’ says Dr Nagpaul.

Responding to the BBC’s findings, the Patients Association chief executive Katherine Murphy says: ‘This news is worrying for patients, who we know are already struggling to access primary care services. This means that even more patients are having difficulty in making or finding a GP appointment. When primary care services cannot cope with patient demand, many end up going to emergency departments unnecessarily, adding to the strain on acute and emergency services.’

The Patients Association is urging the government to invest more in primary care.

‘There must be an emphasis on filing and increasing GP training places, but also on ensuring that there are enough practice nurses and pharmacists for patients to see,’ says Ms Murphy.

Staff retention

A study carried out at the universities of Bath, Bristol and Staffordshire, shows that nearly half of all GPs leaving the profession in England between 2009 and 2014 were under 50 years old.

Commissioned by NHS England and published last month, the report states that NHS reorganisation, higher workloads and less time for patient care are forcing many doctors to leave general practice early.

The report is based on interviews and surveys of 143 GPs who have left the profession early.

Of these, 79% cited unhappiness with their day-to-day working life as a significant factor in their decision, 55% thought that their non-clinical workload was too high and 84% cited workplace pressure as a reason for leaving.

Lead author and qualitative researcher at the University of Bath’s Department for Health Natasha Doran says: ‘This is not the first time we have witnessed a crisis in GP recruitment and retention, but what characterises today’s challenge is the number leaving general practice early in their careers.

‘An increase in administrative tasks has resulted in less time with patients, compromising the ability to practise more patient-centred care.

‘This has impacted on GPs’ sense of professional autonomy and values, resulting in reduced job satisfaction, overwork, stress and, for many, a higher risk of burnout.’

The researchers suggest that to avert a further crisis in GP retention and recruitment, the pace of administrative change must be minimised and the time spent by GPs on work that is not face-to-face patient care should be reduced.

To read the research report, Lost to the NHS: a mixed methods study of why GPs leave practice early in England, go to tinyurl.com/hylgvq1

Finding out more

To read General Practice Nursing in the 21st Century, go to qni.org.uk