Caring for older people was high on the agenda at the RCN’s annual congress recently with the issue of long-term care charges proving the dominant theme.

Outgoing general secretary Christine Hancock pledged that the RCN would not rest until older people in care homes received all their nursing and social care free. ‘We will continue to campaign until everyone in long-term care gets the health care they deserve by right, free on the NHS,’ she said in her farewell address.

She added: ‘And let’s make one thing absolutely clear to politicians: nursing care assistants. Any other definition demonstrates utter ignorance of the realities of modern nursing.’

But politicians from the two main parties refused to give any promises on personal care during a question and answer session. Former RCN president Dame June Clark, a member of the Royal Commission on Long Term Care, summed up the mood of congress when she accused John Denham and Liam Fox of duplicity over the issue. ‘The real practical costs of assessment will be huge. This audience will face a burden of assessing all the needs of patients.’

**Care homes charter loses by one vote**

A resolution proposing that the government establishes a national charter for residents in care homes was lost by just one vote.

Proposing the motion, Carol Dimon of the RCN’s Doncaster branch, said residents’ human rights were being violated daily and that the UK should follow the example of Australia and the USA which both have charters for residents.

Writing in the Congress daily newspaper, she said: ‘A charter would include residents, nurses and carers in its content and address issues such as residents’ right to get out of bed when they want, the right to choose what to eat and the right to have sexual relationships.’

Carers and nurses who oppose residents’ decisions might mean well but they were abusing people’s rights, she added.

The proposed charter would have covered older people as well as those with physical disabilities, learning disabilities or mental health problems. But Lynne Phair of the RCN mental health and older people forum said change was best brought about through education of staff in care homes, while Rosemary Strange of the learning disabilities forum for nurses working with older people believed closer working with residents and their families would enhance care, rather than ‘even more inspections’.

Tom Tait of the learning disabilities forum suggested that robust partnerships between all parties involved in residents’ welfare was the only way to improve care.

At the vote, 192 delegates supported the motion but 193 voted against, with 28 abstentions.

There was overwhelming support at congress for a public education campaign on resuscitation and ‘do no resuscitate’ (DNR) policies.

An increasingly elderly population, advances in medical treatment and a growing awareness of resuscitation practice through hospital dramas have all raised questions about the ethics of resuscitation.

Many speakers said that TV was responsible for generating false impressions about the likely success of cardio-pulmonary resuscitation (CPR).

Charge nurse Jason Warriner claimed television dramas gave ‘false hope’ by glamourising CPR, adding that not attempting resuscitation did not equate with withdrawing treatment. But he called for more communication within care teams over decisions not to resuscitate.

Diana Kingston of the RCN’s critical care forum said the survival rate from CPR to discharge was actually less than 20 per cent but even so the decision not to resuscitate was among the most difficult healthcare professionals had to make.

Carol Britton, a member of the ethics forum agreed, saying: ‘The public has a right to information and to make decisions – a real right and not just a cosmetic mantra.’

Ninety-eight per cent of delegates supported the motion.