absentee staff at least fortnightly. ‘Poor standards are often accompanied by an underlying failure in ensuring safe staffing levels and the right level of skill,’ Dr Carter says. ‘All nurses, doctors and allied health professionals should be able to meet the physical, social and emotional needs of patients and their families.’

Lack of resources
Unison head of health Christina McAnea agrees that under-resourcing is often the cause of problems. She says: ‘Staff shortages or busy periods were identified as times when standards slipped. Staff need enough time and the right training to give elderly people the help they need to eat food and keep up their fluid intake.’

Training is important in ensuring that staff are confident to care for frail and older patients, according to Saga director general Ros Altmann. She believes that nurses usually provide good care but stresses that they are not ‘supermen and women’.

‘Far too many older people end up in acute beds, tended by nurses who are not trained to address their specific needs,’ she says. ‘Specialist elderly care, more emphasis on preventative measures funded from NHS budgets, more domiciliary care and telehealth or telecare are all required.’

Meanwhile, chair of the British Association for Parenteral and Enteral Nutrition Mike Stroud says weighing and screening for malnutrition on admission would help identify at-risk patients. He says: ‘Without screening, malnutrition remains unidentified and untreated which results in increased complications, longer hospital stays and even death.’

It is unlikely that these proposals will be implemented soon because of large scale public sector cuts and the risk of job losses and freezes. Health secretary Andrew Lansley says government plans to establish HealthWatch organisations with the ability to conduct unannounced independent inspections in NHS hospitals would help to uncover and prevent poor care.

Find out more
The dignity and nutrition for older people reports are available at http://tiny.cc/digHyd

Beleaguered Southern Cross sets out national care strategy for industry

Carol Davis reports on a corporate vision intended to drive standards up nationally and reinvigorate the sector

THE LATEST developments at beleaguered Southern Cross Healthcare as Nursing Older People went to press last month revealed that the care homes operator was planning to axe up to 3,000 jobs across the country.

The cuts, representing almost 7 per cent of its 44,000 employees at 750 care homes across the UK, are part of the company’s New Horizons programme to manage an ongoing financial crisis fuelled by spiralling rent prices and a reduction in revenue from local authorities, which are placing fewer people into care following budget cuts. Despite these well-publicised economic troubles the group has been trying to move forward with its care agenda. It has launched a national care strategy Caring for Our Future.

Developed by Irene Gray, the group’s director of care, the strategy sets out standards of care with regular targets – the first of which must be met in September and October. Professor Gray says: ‘The sector faces challenges and opportunities, and we want to drive change for the good of those receiving care as well as those delivering it.’

Professor Gray launched the strategy after consultation with more than 800 Southern Cross staff and residents. She hopes to instil a strong corporate vision in the company’s homes, which will become a national benchmark and drive forward standards.

‘Launching this national strategy was the only way to get everybody facing in one direction,’ says Professor Gray. ‘Care of the elderly has never been an attractive part of nursing, but it is one of the most complex areas which requires multiple skills.’

The strategy provides a framework to measure objectives. These state that:

- All registered nurses will have completed medicines management training by 2012.
- Electronic medicines management, and care records, are being piloted this year for national rollout.
- All nursing and care staff will have nutrition and hydration training by September 2012 and unannounced inspections will ensure compliance.

The care standards targets include supporting staff in advancing their education to BSc and MSc/MBA level through links with key universities, and putting in place a research and development framework to support the development of evidence-based practice.

Improved dementia and end of life care are also objectives and Southern Cross is working with Marie Curie Care, the Alzheimer’s Society and the Department of Health, to adopt advanced training to reduce the use of antipsychotic medication in care homes.

RCN general secretary Peter Carter says the strategy will create a benchmark for the care home sector. ‘We welcome the opportunity to work closely with the company and its other stakeholders to achieve the goals set out.’

Professor Gray adds: ‘You have to aim high to provide the best. We have a vision, a drive and a future, and generating this energy and maintaining it is the way to achieve it and become a benchmark for the industry.’

Carol Davis is a freelance writer

Find out more
Caring for Our Future is available at http://tiny.cc/kv7xp