NEWS ANALYSIS

Your flexible future

A consultation document from the NHS Confederation calls for strong management, multiskilling and blurring of the boundaries between health professions

By Dina Leifer

NURSES WORKING in the NHS in the 21st century could find themselves with responsibilities which used to belong to therapists or doctors. They could be employed by health or social services and be paid a national rate topped up by extra cash, according to the part of the country and their specialism.

This is one interpretation of the future NHS suggested by the managers' organisation the NHS Confederation in its consultation document, Towards the 21st Century.

The document reaffirms the Confederation's commitment to the founding principle of the NHS, that it should be a universally available, needs-driven public service.

The report calls for strong management with clear national guidance. And it urges caution for the current drive to merge trusts and health authorities, arguing that there should be measurable benefits for patients from such mergers.

Pippa Gough, RCN assistant director of nursing policy, welcomed the call for strong management. A lot of the middle management cuts under the previous government had been from nursing, she said.

One of the changes suggested by the document is closer working between health and social services, possibly leading to joint commissioning between the two agencies.

The report says this could include allowing trusts to employ social workers, although it does not say whether social services departments may take on nurses.

Unison deputy head of health Malcolm Wing welcomed the NHS principles contained in the document, but was concerned about the closer working of health and social services, in case it leads to more people having to pay for their care.

'We all support a more collaborative relationship between social services and health,' Mr Wing said. 'But we are extremely nervous this could lead to more health care being redefined and subjected to means testing. We very much oppose the trend to place more and more financial burden on people who should be receiving free health care.'

Ms Gough said the split between health and social care had been difficult for nursing, because nurses had been involved in giving social care for a long time.

Pippa Gough of the RCN said the split between health and social care has been difficult for nurses. Malcolm Wing of Unison expressed concern that closer working between health and social services could lead to more people paying for care

Under the government's public health agenda it would make sense to have closer working between agencies, she said, but the laws governing who was in charge of purchasing community care would have to be changed to avoid conflicts over funding.

'All of these things make very good sense. Health visitors used to be employed by local authorities and some used to be in environmental health departments. It is territory we have been in before,' Ms Gough said.

Other boundaries which the document suggests could be blurred are divisions between the health professions. It talks about multiskilling, reviewing skill mix, reducing occupational boundaries and professional barriers, and responding to local labour markets.

Will this mean the end of the nursing profession as we know it, with staff having to adapt to changing roles and flexible pay?

Jean Trainor, the Confederation's acting chief executive, said nurses should not be worried. We see this as an opportunity for nurses. They are focussing on lots of different areas and being given more to do, not less, she said.

Pay would be flexible, but it would be based around strong national frameworks. Managers wanted to work in partnership with unions, not against them, she said.

'We are looking at training and education, we are looking at skill mix...we are looking at how we can best use all the professions to deliver a 21st century type of health care.

'There will still be people called nurses walking around wards in 20 years' time, but there will also be people called nurses doing lots of other things as well. We've got to move with the times,' she said.

Ms Gough said the RCN supported the idea of a flexible workforce, provided it had a positive effect on nurses' skills and their career development. Some projects had removed the title 'nurse' from people working above a certain grade, which cut nurses' career path short. 'We are supportive of multiskilling, if it is positively meant and it is not about skilling down,' she said.

Mr Wing said Unison was in favour of the workforce being organised in the way that would give the best patient care. Terms like 'multiskilling' and 'generic working' had been given a bad name by some cost-driven projects, he said. 'But if multiskilling means proposals to enhance the skills of staff, we very much support those ideas,' he added.

'Nurses are going to be central to the delivery of health care over the coming decades. I don't think nurses have anything to fear from the boundaries changing.'

The Confederation hopes to gather most of its members' views on the document by October 1. It will also consult the Department of Health and professional groups.

Towards the 21st century: a way forward for the NHS is available for £10 to non members, £5 to members, from the Confederation by faxing an order to 0121 414 1120.