Smooth the path into nursing

How does Frank Dobson hope to fill 6,000 extra training places he promised for nurses? Liam Williams offers some advice

Frank Dobson recently promised 15,000 extra nurses and 6,000 extra places for nursing students. At first, it did seem wonderful. However, reality has now set in.

Immediately after the announcements, the RCN and BMA discovered that the 'new' figures for recruitment had almost certainly already been commissioned.

But let's give Mr Dobson the benefit of the doubt and assume he really does plan to recruit additional students. Where will they come from when there was a shortfall of a thousand applications for pre-registration nursing last year?

Having spoken to and worked with students around the country, I have some advice that might help Mr Dobson ensure these places are filled.

He can start by plugging the leak of experienced registered nurses currently leaving the NHS as they are needed to supervise and educate the nurses of the future.

How is he to do this? By rewarding them with a salary that reflects their professional status, and by ensuring NHS trusts deliver family friendly policies. Not only will these measures help retain the nurses of today, but they may begin to make nursing a worthwhile option for future students.

Add to this a fair bursary that reflects the amount of work nursing students offer the NHS and we might be getting somewhere. All nursing students should be given bursaries that ensure they are able to qualify without significant debt.

Pre-registration programmes currently have drop-out rates of between 22 and 27 per cent. Surely this does not represent the value for money the chancellor wishes his fellow secretaries of state to find? These programmes need to be reviewed. Many students have problems accessing personal and link tutors, but this is not necessarily the tutors' fault. Since integration into higher education, there have been numerous redundancies and early 'retirements' resulting in a lack of nurse tutors. So who is going to teach the extra 6,000 students?

Universities seem to be trying to recruit nurse tutors with PhD and Masters qualifications. The problem is that these qualifications are still rare in a profession that has only recently embraced higher education. In the short term, universities need to recruit nurses that have the skills and knowledge to train students, but they also need to give them support to achieve a higher academic status.

Currently, many trusts recruit students from abroad. Perhaps Mr Dobson thinks this overseas drive can continue. However, a consultation document published by the National Health Service Executive (NHSE) in June this year suggested that students from overseas, including the Commonwealth and the EU, should no longer be eligible for a full bursary in this country. Can we really afford to lose this valuable source?

All in all, I welcome the promise of extra nursing students, but this government lacks an understanding of the nursing process. It needs to assess the situation, make realistic plans to persuade potential recruits that nursing is a valuable profession, implement the necessary changes and then sit back and evaluate the New NHS.

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