Health Unions fear Government plan to streamline nurse grading will be too rigid

Unions step up attack on grading shake-up

By Heather Stephen

Nursing Unions have launched a further attack on the government's plans to reform nurse grading.

Health unions were taken aback by health secretary Frank Dobson's surprise announcement a fortnight ago that he wished to slim down the system to three grades.

And after more information was released last week unions said the proposed scheme may not be an improvement on the existing system.

NHS Executive chief executive Alan Langlands revealed the government's latest plans in a letter to trust and health authority chief executives and NHSE regional directors.

He confirmed there would be three tiers of nursing grades. Nurses on the existing grades D and E would be redefined as 'qualified nurses', nurses on grades F, G, H and I would become 'expert nurses' and clinical managers, and the proposed 'nurse consultants' would be added at the top.

He explained that the government wanted to break down traditional barriers and pay nurses and other staff on the basis of responsibility, competence and performance.

'Unison deputy head of health Malcolm Wing said: 'This looks like a more rigid system than the one we have. I am not sure how different levels of responsibility will be reflected and the system does not recognise the UK's 100,000 nursing assistants.'

'Roger Kline, labour relations director of the Community Practitioners' and Health Visitors' Association, said: 'This sounds like a hospital model, but I am unclear as to how this model would work in the community.'

And an RCN spokesperson said: 'We do not have a problem with a three-tier structure, but we would like to know how competency will be assessed.'

Nurse recruitment pack 'too idealistic'

The government has been accused of giving would-be nurses unrealistic expectations of the profession.

The information pack sent out as part of the health department's £5 million recruitment drive portrays nursing as a dynamic career with 'unlimited horizons'.

Pledges include flexible working for all and the promise 'you will be encouraged to develop personally and professionally throughout your career'.

The campaign has had an encouraging response, with 11,000 calls for further information - a third from nurses considering returning to the profession.

But unions are concerned the campaign paints an idealised image of nursing which the NHS may have difficulty delivering.

'Roger Kline, labour relations director of the Community Practitioners' and Health Visitors' Association, said: 'This is an optimistic picture - let's hope it becomes an accurate one.'

An RCN spokesperson said the college was delighted with the response to the government campaign, but added: 'There is concern that trusts need to do more work on putting family friendly policies into place to retain existing staff and encourage others to return to nursing.'

Unison professional officer Karen Jennings said: 'We have been advocating employing back-injured nurses in NHS Direct for some time as it allows people to continue to use their skills.'

Five pilot schemes are already running and a sixth, in Nottinghamshire, was set to open this week.

NHS Direct pilots brought forward

NHS Direct, the nurse-run helpline, will cover six out of ten people in England by December.

Health secretary Frank Dobson said last week the existing pilots had proved such a success that the next batch of pilot sites could start five months earlier than anticipated.

He added that he hoped the scheme would attract nurses with back injuries back to the NHS.

Unison professional officer Karen Jennings said: 'We have been advocating employing back-injured nurses in NHS Direct for some time as it allows people to continue to use their skills.'

As Nursing Standard went to press, there were strong indications that ministers would accept almost all the recommendations by JM Consulting Ltd, who conducted a review of the current legislation governing the profession last year.

However, health visiting is likely to stay a separate profession.

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