Make do and mend ingenuity

STURDILY INDEPENDENT and relatively autonomous, district nursing lacks the glamour associated with some areas of nursing. Pound to a penny most district nurses do not give a fig about such things. The majority of them have probably also been far too busy to worry about the Audit Commission’s review of district nursing services in England and Wales. The result, a report titled First Assessment, gives some insight into the staggering workload and responsibilities of these stalwart professionals.

Imagine: district nurses treat 2.75 million patients a year at a cost of £650 million. Very often, they are the professionals who are left to pick up the pieces of changing healthcare policies. Patients whizzing in and out of hospital so fast they barely make an impression on the beds, never mind the nurses, end up at home mightily relieved when a district nurse comes calling.

Make do and mend ingenuity is often one of the most valuable assets a district nurse can have in caring for people in their own homes. The trouble is, what patients and their carers can expect from their local district nursing service varies tremendously from one area to the next. There are gaps and there is duplication.

District nursing services are stretched to the limit and heading for a potential staffing crisis. Not only is retirement looming for around 10 per cent of the existing district nurse workforce, but there has also been a significant reduction in the numbers of qualified nurses choosing to undertake specialist district nurse training. A shame, since despite the pressures and difficulties this is a job with considerable appeal for nurses who enjoy using a bit of initiative.

First Assessment is timely given the introduction of primary care and local health groups. As the Audit Commission points out, now is the moment for district nurses to influence the future shape of community nursing services. Unaccustomed as they undoubtedly are to being thrust into the spotlight in such a fashion, they can take pride in the bouquets offered by the review. But they also need to take action to field the brickbats.

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A chance to gauge the mood of the profession

WELL OVER a thousand nurses are expected in Harrogate next week for the Royal College of Nursing Congress. Always a showcase event, this year’s Congress is likely to be of particular interest to media representatives eager to gauge the profession’s mood in the aftermath of the pay campaign and with staff shortages continuing to cause concern. Impossible to predict what the mood will be, or how it will change from one day to the next: spontaneity is part of the pleasure of Congress. Suffice to say that the last year has given the profession as much to celebrate as to scorn.

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March 3 Vol 13 No 24/1999 Nursing Standard

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