Unions back plans for school nurses to give advice on emergency contraception

Nurses are divided over school sex education plan

By Heather Stephen

GOVERNMENT PLANS to extend the sex education role of school nurses have been welcomed by nursing unions but dubbed ‘appalling’ by Roman Catholic nurses.

The government’s Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) has yet to publish its report on teenage pregnancies, but it is expected to encourage school nurses to give advice on the pill and where to get emergency contraception.

Nora McCarthy, nurse and national secretary of the Catholic Women’s Guild, said: ‘This is appalling. School nurses haven’t got time to carry out general health checks so do they have time to take a proper medical history from these children? Sex education should be about more than pregnancy. What about sexually transmitted diseases, legality and morality? ’

‘The guild isn’t saying teenagers don’t deserve a better deal, because they do, but they have to be taught about preserving their bodies for their husbands.’

But Pat Jackson, professional officer at the Community Practitioners’ and Health Visitors’ Association, was more positive, saying: ‘It is not a new role to provide advice but I am delighted this has been acknowledged and hopefully that recognition will lead to investment in training.’

RCN policy adviser Jane Naish said the college was fully behind any initiative to extend sex education.

‘Young people have a right to health care, we need investment in the service and nurses have a duty to care. ‘The RCN is not taking a moral stance. This is about access to services.’

Vis Crouch, a school nurse who hit the headlines with her drop-in sex advice sessions in the West Country and an adviser to the SEU, said she hopes its report will promote similar clinics for all secondary schools.

‘National guidelines for school nurses providing sex education would be brilliant. At the moment the system is very unsatisfactory. Lots of school nurses are doing what I’m doing but it is a muddy area and we need a proper set up.’

RCN calls for ‘proper’ sex education

THE RCN has renewed calls for ‘proper’ sex education programmes in schools following evidence that teenagers in the UK have the worst sexual health in Europe.

Research published in the British Medical Journal shows that the sexual health of teenagers in England and Wales has worsened significantly over the past four years.

STD diagnoses among adolescents aged 16 to 19 soared by up to 35 per cent in one year, according to the research. Terminations among the same age group increased by more than 12 per cent, and pregnancies by almost 5 per cent.

Writing in the BMI, professor of European public health Martin McKee also highlighted findings that showed teenagers in the UK were more likely to experiment with illicit drugs than those anywhere else in the EU.

The journal suggested that a combination of poor sex education, poverty and long working hours among parents lie at the root of the problem.

RCN policy adviser Jane Naish called for all schools to have nurse-led sex education programmes involving children as young as nine or ten.

‘We are calling for proper sex education, by which we don’t mean a one-off didactic lesson,’ Ms Naish said.

Commenting on the decline in numbers of school nurses, she added: ‘We need to restore proper school nursing services to young people.’

RCN president Christine Watson opened an RCN resource centre at the Henleigh Hall nursing home in Sheffield last week. She is pictured with the home’s activities organiser Diane Bennie, who donned an old-fashioned uniform for the occasion. Similar centres, designed to give nurses access to research papers, library services and the Internet, opened last week at the North Staffordshire Hospital NHS Trust and the Choices Housing Association in the West Midlands.

University strike could affect student nurses

NURSING STUDENTS could be affected if industrial action planned by university teachers goes ahead this summer.

Dissatisfied with their pay rise in April, teachers have voted for one day of strike action on May 25.

And following a ballot by the Association of University Teachers last week, they also agreed to disruptive action in June and August.

Almost 70 per cent of teachers voted to ‘take action short of a strike’. This will mean four days of ‘unco-operative action’ in June, aiming to disrupt exams, and four days in August aimed at affecting admission procedures.

Teachers also said they would boycott bureaucracy.