Winter pressure workloads hit A&E in the height of summer

A&E STAFF are facing crisis workloads even in the height of summer, hospital managers have admitted.

The warning that A&E services are at full stretch came this week amid claims that patients arriving at A&E in Liverpool have had to wait 14 hours to be seen by medical staff, and that emergency triage procedures are in place as early as 3am on Monday morning.

In a letter to Pearse Butler, chief executive of the Royal Liverpool & Broadgreen University Hospitals NHS Trust, RCN regional officer Steve Flanagan stated: 'The fact that we find ourselves in July and August facing such pressures does not fill us with confidence that the matter will become satisfactory before so-called winter pressures affect us.'

Mr Flanagan said that the problems facing A&E were caused in part by a general shortage of acute medical beds throughout the city.

He has called on RCN general secretary Christine Hancock to intervene by lobbying health secretary Frank Dobson for extra funding.

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But she highlighted a forthcoming £1.5 million package of government funding aimed at doubling the size of the acute admissions unit, which is expected then to take on some of the GP referrals that currently go to A&E.

New figures reveal extent of decline in workforce

Ten years ago there were 510,900 whole time equivalent nursing staff. By 1997 that had fallen to 436,400.

Over the same period the number of patients passing through hospitals increased by 73 per cent.

RCN senior research officer in employment relations John Stock said the government was right in its claim that the drop in the overall number of nurses in the NHS could be explained by the removal of nursing students from the workforce when they became supernumerary in the early 1990s.

The total number of nurses and midwives fell by more than 53,000 in less than ten years.

The health department issued a rebuttal statement insisting that levels of spending on health care were less important than the standard of service received. In this regard, the NHS fared well in comparison to other countries, a spokesperson said.

The UK continues to spend far less on health than most other European countries

The UK's total number of nurses and midwives fell by more than 53,000 in less than ten years.

But the number of patients treated rose by nearly three quarters during the same period.

Ministers and health officials claim the changes are due to senior nurses being re-titled as managers and student nurses no longer being included at all.

But the author of a report from the Office of Health Economics (OHE), Peter Yeun, insists there has been a massive exodus from the profession.

His report says that although there are currently more than twice as many hospital nurses and midwives as in 1951, their numbers have been in decline since 1989.

By Bill Poult

Call for better staffing levels

THE RCN has urged ministers, MPs, policy-makers and NHS managers to sit up and take notice of cases where patients suffer due to inadequate numbers of nursing staff.

And it has warned that modern acute care cannot be provided with a workforce which is only half qualified.

The calls come in the RCN's evidence to a Commons health select committee inquiry into adverse clinical incidents and outcomes in medical care. In its evidence the RCN says: 'Research has demonstrated that patients who are cared for by registered nurses recover more quickly than those cared for by unqualified staff.

And citing the example of a woman who bled to death following surgery at Eastbourne District General Hospital after her observations were recorded irregularly by unregistered staff, the RCN said: 'This tragedy illustrates the potential dangers of inadequate staffing levels. There are some important lessons to be learnt particularly in ensuring staffing levels and skill mix reflect the degree of patient dependency in any one clinical area at any one time.'

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