Good news, but just a start

Jean Gray

THE REVIEW body has certainly listened to nurses this year and, to its credit, the government has accepted the review body’s recommendations in full. For the second year running, nurses will receive a non-staged, above-inflation rise and that has to be good news. According to the evidence presented to the review body team and the latest university figures, last year’s enhanced rise for newly qualified staff, along with the recruitment campaign, is attracting more people into the profession.

Accepting the staff negotiators’ arguments, in spite of opposition from the health departments, the review body followed up last year’s boost for D grades by rewarding long-serving C and E grade nurses. Members of the review body team didn’t just do this out of the goodness of their hearts. Their report makes it clear that the claims made by staff organisations were borne out in trusts as the team toured the country. ‘The evidence from the parties was reflected in a large part on our visits. Generally, retention problems at E grade were most frequently mentioned,’ says the report.

So nurses can feel pleased that they made their case and have largely won it, in spite of some disappointments such as the failure to make discretionary payments for senior nurses automatic. The 3.4 per cent basic rise could hardly be described as over generous, but it does represent a real-terms increase. This must continue in future if we are to end recruitment and retention problems, particularly if we bear in mind that the health service has to compete in the wider labour market. According to the Office for National Statistics, pay rises in the economy as a whole are around 4.9 per cent, so there is no room for complacency quite yet.

Oh, and by the way, the review body was none too pleased with those trusts that failed to pay last year’s increase on time, saying it ‘deplored’ the delay. It has been assured that you won’t have to wait this year. Let’s hope this promise is fulfilled.

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‘The NHS is dealing with flu. not coping with it’

WHEN we look back on the first few weeks of the new century, let’s hope it is seen as a turning point in the fortunes of the NHS. The new millennium failed to bring eitherArmageddon or computer bug chaos. Instead it brought a simple flu epidemic that crippled our health service, putting nurses and patients under the kind of stress that should never be repeated.

Nurses have made it clear to us that the system is far from ‘coping’, as ministers claimed. One nurse summed up the view of many: ‘The NHS is dealing with it, but it is not coping with it, because we are not able to give adequate care to patients.’

The only good thing to come out of all this is that Tony Blair has admitted the NHS is underfunded and has pledged to bring it up to European standards. This has to happen sooner rather than later. And he must listen to managers who have called for an end to annual ‘efficiency savings’ of around 3 per cent. According to the journal Public Finance, periodic ‘beds’ crises (for beds, read the nurses who staff them) are inevitable with occupancy levels of more than 90 per cent, yet they currently run at between 90 and 95 per cent in the NHS. This will rise even further if the efficiency drive continues next year.

Can it really be ‘efficient’ to have patients ferried around the country in ambulances looking for beds?

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