Hancock responds to Blair with five new challenges

RCN general secretary says government has six months to save the health service

By Nick Lipley

RCN GENERAL secretary Christine Hancock this week issued five challenges to the government, managers and nurses during her opening address at RCN Congress.

At the start of the week-long conference in Bournemouth, Miss Hancock responded to the prime minister's own five challenges for the NHS, which he set out following this year's Budget.

"On the eve of the last general election, Tony Blair told the electorate it had 24 hours to save the NHS. The electorate, apparently, took heed and voted accordingly.

"Today, I think the government has a little longer than 24 hours - but not much. Maybe six months? The people who deliver and receive health services have got to feel the difference very soon."

Miss Hancock challenged ministers to end nurse shortages and poor patient care by continuing to follow the example of managers in Leeds, who have already started meeting with nurses on the issue.

"If we see a repeat of this winter's sorry tale of an NHS on its knees, people will lose faith in the NHS," she said.

"And it's not just a winter's tale anymore. In some areas the impact of emergency pressures on patient care is taking its toll throughout the year."

Miss Hancock called on the government and employers to support nurses in their efforts to develop professionally. And in response to recent calls to bring back matrons, she suggested investment in leadership programmes for nurses instead.

See analysis pages 12-13

Mental health education plan

ALL NURSES, midwives and health visitors should receive education and training to work with people with mental health problems, according to a report due to be launched at RCN Congress this week.

The UKCC has drawn up an action plan, contained in the report The Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting Contribution to the Continuing Care of People with Mental Health Problems. It says education in mental health issues should be addressed in pre-registration branches and through post-registration continuing professional development activity.

Better collaboration is also required between non-mental health trained and registered mental health nursing staff in the provision of continuing care.

Martin Ward, one of the report's authors and director of the RCN Institute's mental health programme, said: 'These recommendations would need a major financial commitment by NHS trusts. It would require new courses and a form of mentorship.'

Hague blames ministers

OPPOSITION leader William Hague was due to lay out his plans to tackle nurses' frustrations with the health service in his address to RCN Congress.

He was set to promise to scrap the government's waiting list initiative and tell nurses that patients would be treated according to their clinical need under a Conservative government.

He accused ministers, not managers, of being responsible for the failures of the NHS and the pressures on services.