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

Hancock responds to Blair with five new challenges

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 employ managers to invest in leadership programmes for nurses, trust managers to tackle emergency pressures, employers and ministers to support nurses' professional development, ministers to reward nurses properly and nurses to make the most of the opportunities they have to increase pay in real terms and introducing a new pay structure "which rewards people properly for what they do". She also announced the launch of an RCN campaign, Turning talk into action, aimed at providing nurses with the tools they need to tackle problems with emergency pressures at local level.

She urged all NHS trusts 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.

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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.

Health: the issue for next election

HEALTH IS set to be the key battle-ground at the next election and nurses must ensure their voices are heard in the political debate, RCN president Christine Watson has told RCN Congress.

She said the emphasis that the prime minister and the chancellor took in the last election, Tony Blair, "was now placing on the NHS, which he set out following this year's Budget.

"The message has got across, at last, that when people talk about bed shortages they mean nurse shortages," she said. "When wards close it is not because of a lack of beds, but because of a lack of nurses. "And when your operation is cancelled it is because there aren't enough nurses available to care for you afterwards."

Ms Watson used her annual President's Lunch at congress to present the Nursing Standard Clinical and Practice Management Awards. See feature pages 18-19