This was a powerful moment... nurses making a stand for some of the most vulnerable people in our society

under which many people in nursing homes are means-tested for their nursing care. What better way to illustrate the 'turning talk into action' theme of RCN Congress. If the government delivers on long-term care, it will be a victory for all those nurses who have campaigned so hard on the issue.

The secretary of state has obviously listened to nurses on other subjects too. He spoke of his support for national rather than local pay and stressed the unacceptability of dirty hospitals, announcing national cleanliness standards for wards. He also emphasised the importance of strong nursing leadership. This last point was not lost on the nurses from the RCN's clinical leadership programme who had travelled to Bournemouth to meet Mr Milburn. They had the eye for detail and plenty of clout within an organisation. But I also pointed out that nurses do not want to return to the inflexibility and rigid regimes of the past. Memories of matron obviously struck a chord with delegates but behind the laughter was a determination to develop nursing leadership which always puts the needs of patients first.

Commitment to patients

It is this commitment to patients which lies behind the Turning Talk Into Action campaign that we launched in Bournemouth. I hope many of you will add your energy and ideas to this initiative. It involves nurses meeting with trust chief executives to discuss what steps can be taken to ease the impact of emergency pressures.

Leadership was also a theme of my speech to congress. I took the plunge and talked about matron. I explained how we wanted to preserve all her good qualities, for example, an opportunity to explain how nurses know what should be done to improve patient care but often lack the confidence or authority to make it happen. Again, it seems this message is hitting home at last with the welcome news that the government is to invest in leadership programmes for ward sisters and charge nurses.

Increasing nurses' effectiveness

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