and Beyond conference held in Edinburgh last week. Christian Duffin reports

US faces drastic shortage of staff

NURSE SHORTAGES in the United States could increase tenfold to one million within 20 years because of the rise in the proportion of elderly people in the population, the Emergency Nursing 2000 and Beyond conference was told. The former president of the US Emergency Nurses Association, Jean Proehl, said researchers were predicting the current shortage of 100,000 would soar to between 500,000 and a million by 2020. 'In 30 years ours will be a very old country and for some, health care will be difficult to find,' she said.

'RCN general secretary Christine Hancock has said that in Britain the problems are more to do with retention – in America it’s the opposite. Our problem is getting them into the profession, not keeping them. We aren’t recruiting enough.' In a presentation highlighting current innovations, Ms Proehl also told delegates of successful schemes in the US that allow friends and relatives to visit their loved ones while they are being treated in A&E units. 'They found it was a big comfort for visitors to go into the unit,' she said.

Journalists tricked their way into A&E after shootings

STAFF TREATING victims of the Columbine High School shootings in Littleton, Colorado, were hampered by journalists posing as nurses and sneaking in to the A&E ward, a hospital manager has claimed.

Pressure nurses were spending much of their time rooting out reporters who had tricked their way in, the Emergency Nursing 2000 and Beyond conference heard last week.

Staff felt like 'police officers' during the reporting frenzy that followed the shootings of dozens of students on April 20 last year, said Ray Coniglio, a manager at St Anthony’s Hospital in Denver, which treated some of the victims.

'The press dressed up in green and blue shirts like teams of nurses or medical staff and tried to sneak in to the hospital’s emergency ward,' said Mr Coniglio, director of trauma at St Anthony’s. 'We had to stand by the ER doors to stop them going in. That was more difficult than handling the patients’ injuries.' The rampage resulted in 15 deaths, including the two gunmen, 15 hospitalisations and eight emergency admissions. One member of hospital staff was nearly shot by a police sniper because he was wearing a long dark coat similar to the ones the killers were wearing.

The shootings had enormous psychological impact on all those involved, but nurses remained focused throughout, said Mr Coniglio. 'Nurses with children of their own were probably the most affected but they wanted to come in the next day and talk about it. That was their therapy.' St Anthony’s nurses have testified at local and national gun control hearings since the shootings, he added.

Mr Coniglio told the conference how the hospital coped with the chaos that surrounded the shootings and the lessons staff learned. The hospital has been trying to fund an internet link-up with hospitals in the area in preparation for potential tragedies with large numbers of casualties. He urged UK nurses to have 'worst case' scenarios in place at their hospitals, even if they thought they were in suburban areas where such large-scale shootings would be considered very unlikely.

Ministers listened to nurses’ ideas

PRESSURE FROM nurses forced the government to take action this summer in a bid to prevent another winter crisis, RCN general secretary Christine Hancock told the emergency nursing conference.

By speaking out on unacceptable standards of care, she said nurses created a climate in which ministers were forced to act. Miss Hancock added that nurses on the wards knew the answers to many of the problems facing hospitals, but lacked the confidence to get their message across.

‘Nursing leadership is central if you want to improve health care,’ Miss Hancock said.

She said the RCN’s ward leadership programme helped nurses use their experience of listening to patients to improve standards. 'Listening to patients may seem obvious. But creating systems of care built around patient need often amounts to the most radical action we can take,' she said.

Still dangerous in Northern Ireland

NURSES IN Northern Ireland face huge dangers just getting to work when violence flares, the conference heard.

Garrett Martin, practice development senior nurse at Craigavon Area Hospital, County Armagh, said: ‘One nurse recently tried to get into work but there was a bus being burned and youths throwing petrol bombs. She wanted to use the side roads and I told her not to. But she came in anyway.’ He added that managers are forced to strike deals with paramilitary groups on where ambulances can stop during clashes. ‘Ambulance crews weren't happy just to drive into these areas,' he said.

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