Nurses know from experience what works – and what doesn’t. The challenge is to make good practice mainstream rather than the exception.

Increasing the numbers

August is proving to be far from the ‘silly season’ for all those concerned with the future of health care and nursing. The arrival of the NHS Plan last month has unleashed intense activity in government circles. Though technically the plan is about England, both the Scottish and Welsh administrations are actively considering its implications.

This level of attention creates tremendous opportunities for nursing and nurses. We’ve got plenty to say, not least about where the proposed additional 20,000 nurses are going to be found – and that’s just the target for England.

The issue of how to increase the nursing workforce is not shrouded in great mystery. Nurses know from experience what works – and what doesn’t. The challenge is how to make good practice mainstream rather than the exception.

When the RCN held a meeting at the NHS Confederation’s annual conference in Glasgow, our speakers included a senior nurse from Portsmouth. She explained how she turned around staff shortages in her unit by introducing flexible rostering and involving her whole team in taking responsibility for its success.

It’s not the easiest system to operate but it can be made to work, where there’s a will. The nurses attracted to her unit – which now has no shortages – included those who had left nursing because they couldn’t combine their work with family commitments. The irony is that during this very period, the local paper was running banner headlines about a neighbouring trust which was going overseas to recruit nurses.

Holding on to the best

Everyone agrees staff shortages could scupper all the good ideas now on the table for the NHS. So as nurses we should meet with a highly receptive audience when we outline our common sense approach to attracting people back to nursing and sustaining nurses still in the profession. As for those beginning the cycle, I’m delighted that more and more people want to become nurses, but their enthusiasm must not be rewarded with poor clinical placements or overstretched education staff.

Nurses leave nursing for a combination of reasons. The King’s Fund has published a report on nursing called The Last Straw, which argues it is the culmination of factors, rather than a single reason, which prompts nurses to call it a day.

Issues like community nurses paying for their work petrol, or losing out financially when taking annual leave send nurses the wrong signals as well as being inherently unfair. I’d also put into this category the Department of Health’s recruitment campaign, which claimed nurses earned on average over £20,000. The Advertising Standards Authority has rightly agreed this was misleading.

Flexible rostering is one way to help nurses to combine work and family commitments

A ballot for quality

Healthcare assistants are an integral part of NHS modernisation and of nursing

By next month the political parties will be gearing up for their conferences. I’ll be attending with nursing colleagues to ensure our messages hit home. The prospect of a general election on the horizon should add an edge to proceedings.

Nurses will also be gearing up for their own all-important ballot: the RCN vote on widening membership to include healthcare assistants and nurse cadets. The healthcare assistants question isn’t going to go away – they’re an integral part of NHS modernisation and of nursing.

We now know that the new nursing and midwifery council, which is to replace our existing regulatory body, the UKCC, will involve itself in the preparation, supervision and performance of healthcare assistants. This is how it should be, though it’s disappointing this wider remit falls short of regulation.

The RCN too has its part to play in contributing to the drive to improve quality of nursing care for patients; this is what the RCN ballot is all about.

More information on the ballot is available on 020 7647 3495 and at www.rcn.org.uk. We’re urging RCN members to ‘make your mark on nursing’s future’ – please make sure you do!

Christine Hancock is RCN General Secretary

Christine Hancock column