NHS rescue plan hinges on recruitment of nurses

By Ruth Williams

THE GOVERNMENT has published its plan for the future of the NHS – and nurses are central to its success.

Health secretary Alan Milburn told Nursing Standard that the rescue plan hinges on whether he can achieve his ‘ambitious’ target of recruiting 20,000 extra nurses.

The publication of the NHS Plan followed four months of consultation with 100 professionals and patients on six modernisation action teams, including RCN general secretary Christine Hancock.

The 144-page document is packed with proposals including:

- The new model of nurse education, with its emphasis on developing practical skills and stepping in and off points, expected to be standard in England by 2002.
- Joint training in communication skills across the healthcare professions.
- Free nursing care for people living in nursing and residential homes, although ‘personal’ care will still be means-tested. It will be up to nurses to decide whether a care home resident needs nursing or personal care.
- The appointment of ‘modern matrons’, with responsibility for resolving clinical issues and environmental problems such as poor cleanliness.
- Appropriately qualified nurses to make and receive referrals, admit and discharge patients, order investigations and diagnostic tests, run clinics and prescribe drugs.
- A review of how nurses prove they are keeping up to date.
- The department of health will be investing in continuing professional development.

Milburn told students need more money

STUDENTS NEED more money, the secretary of state for health, Alan Milburn, was told at a face-to-face meeting with student representatives.

As part of its review of the current system of funding for nursing students in England, Mr Milburn met with ten nursing and midwifery students from across the country, following an invitation extended at this year’s RCN Congress in Bournemouth.

He listened for an hour to the current issues and concerns surrounding nursing and midwifery education. In particular, he heard about the complex funding system and subsequent financial hardship, poor quality accommodation and placements, and lack of childcare facilities.

One of the student representatives commented: ‘It was very much personal experiences that Mr Milburn wanted to hear about. He seemed genuinely interested in people’s different experiences, which hinged mainly on the need for more money, but also seemed to show a need for standardisation in the way nursing and midwifery students are treated.’

Former RCN student member of council Gemma Hale said: ‘The quality of students’ education has implications for care standards across the UK, and funding impacts heavily on all students’ learning and educational experiences.

‘With this in mind, we may have now seen one of the first governmental acknowledgements that nursing and midwifery students have an important part to play in the provision of current and future health care.’

Inquiry into drop-out rates

THE HEALTH department is to launch a national inquiry into why so many students drop out of nursing courses.

Lord Hunt, who announced the move at the Council of Deans and Heads of UK University Faculties for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting conference, pledged the health department would implement an action plan over the coming months.

The inquiry is likely to focus on financial and academic support and accommodation.

RCN education adviser Sue Howard warned: ‘It is fundamental that any work on drop-out rates starts with a common definition of attrition, so all universities use the same criteria.’