This year's chaos in A&E may be made even worse by millennium staffing problems

Government urged to act quickly over winter crisis

By Adele Waters

URGENT ACTION must be taken to prevent long trolley waits in A&E units this winter, the RCN's governing council has insisted.

RCN general secretary Christine Hancock said trolley waits in A&E were 'the biggest horror to people in this country' and that she would immediately set up meetings to plan a prevention strategy, similar to one held two years ago.

'Leaving sick people lying on trolleys is an outrage and a disgrace in a civilised society. If we want to help the sickest, vulnerable and neglected people we have the potential to do something about it,' she said.

In 1997 the RCN organised a summit of professionals, managers, patients and government representatives. It resulted in the government providing an additional £300 million to prevent a winter crisis.

Earlier this month the RCN joined other professional groups at a winter briefing and information exchange with junior health minister Gisela Stuart and civil servants.

'Lying in a corridor for 20 hours is not safe.' Miss Hancock told council members. 'We should put more pressure on government regarding the state of people in emergency care.'

Council members agreed that congestion problems in A&E were caused by inadequate numbers of qualified nursing staff.

Council member for East Anglia Susan Burt said trolley waits were now a year-round problem, creating a depressing situation. 'It's a staffing issue,' she said.

'There is a lot of pressure on trusts to tackle waiting lists. I can't see a way round it.'

Congress chair Maura Buchanan added: 'No amount of risk assessments will get away from the fact that we do not have the nurses to deal with the patients.'

But she said the real staffing crisis would only become apparent in early December when nurses had handed in their notice so they could get the millennium holiday off, and when agencies had a better idea of what their potential cover could be.

She also warned that administrative support would not be available for eight days over the millennium, placing an additional burden on nurses.

Patient records would be disordered, she said, causing disruption.

Member for South East Thames Linda Bailey said many hospitals relied on nurses who were visiting the UK on a working holiday, mainly from Australia and New Zealand.

Many would go home for the millennium and the RCN should try to find out how agencies would be affected.

She also said that the real staffing crisis was for the next year, not the millennium holiday, and that the RCN should try to find out how agencies would be affected.

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Newly elected RCN association of nursing students chair Sal Porter welcomed the report's proposals but said she remained concerned about the pressure on nurse tutors' time, as well as the quality of clinical placements.

'I will never forget my first day at university. My tutor said I could see us each for four hours over the year. And that is for a course where you require constant help and support. It seems a real shame,' she told council.

Mohamma Seidu, council member for North West Thames, said: 'The commission has done a good job but someone needs to address the issue of nursing teachers. If we are not careful we will get ourselves in a pickle.'

And Northern Ireland representative James McAllister said: 'Nurse teachers are now in universities. They have to teach, practice, publish and research, and now they need to implement a new programme. We have to think of staff to student ratios.'

Workloads weighing tutors down

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[Image: The sight of people waiting on trolleys has become commonplace in A&E departments across the UK]

Nurses in fresh bid to help smokers quit

AN INITIATIVE aimed at giving nurses the skills they need to help smokers kick the habit was launched last week by the RCN and the Health Education Authority (HEA).

A resource pack titled Clearing the Air has been produced giving information on the type of people most at risk from lung cancer, how smokers should begin a cessation programme, the risks of passive smoking and the benefits of nicotine replacement therapy.

The RCN and the HEA hope that nurses who take the messages on board will have the confidence to address the issue with patients, even when they are seeing them about an unrelated condition.

Launching the pack, RCN president Christine Watson said: 'Nurses have a vital role to play in encouraging people to make the choice about healthy living.'

'This doesn't mean pressurising people. It's about giving them support and guidance. We know that a combination of nicotine replacement therapy and professional advice works.'

HEA cancer programme manager Steve Woodward added: 'This pack will help nurses to feel more confident about raising the issue. If a nurse takes every opportunity to ask about smoking it will make a big difference - in the long run it will lead to more people quitting.'

RCN members can obtain a pack free of charge from RCN Direct on 0345 726100.

[Image: An RCN pack aims to help nurses support patients to quit smoking]