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And ministers are pinning their hopes of reaching that target principally on attracting new recruits, rather than unearthing more nurse returners or simply encouraging staff to stay in the NHS.

Health secretary Alan Milburn also announced an 11 per cent rise in NHS training budgets from April, is aimed at boosting the number of nurses and midwives to rise by 'at least' 1,000 more training places for nurses.

Mr Milburn said progress had already been made, pointing to a 6,300 increase in the number of nurses in 12 months to September last year, and a 17,100 increase between 1997 and last year.

The target supersedes the previous goal set in the NHS Plan last year, which promised 20,000 more nurses by 2004. Last week's announcement was met with some scepticism by nursing unions, who had already described the original target as 'highly ambitious but achievable'.

RCN general secretary, Christine Hancock said: 'We will need to see major steps taken to ensure that improved working conditions, particularly flexible ways of working, are consistent across the UK and that levels of student attrition are dramatically reduced.'

Union head of nursing Karen Jennings said: 'It's difficult to see how the targets they already have will be reached.' The basic problems of low pay and staff morale still have to be tackled, she added.

'Staffing levels are beginning to get better and nurses may once again say to their daughters and sons that this is a good job,' she said.

According to the government's figures, the number of nurses and midwives is to rise by at least 59,600 to 403,200 by 2009. The figures are a head count, not whole time equivalents.

A breakdown of the figures reveals that the number of midwives will rise by 44 per cent over the next ten years.

Royal College of Midwives general secretary Karlene Davis promised to work with ministers to achieve the target by developing recruitment and retention strategies.

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Latest figures show the number of nurses in England has gone up by 17,100 since 1997

A NEW core curriculum that will be shared by students from all the health professions will be in place by next year.

By Nick Lipley

The curriculum will place greater emphasis on communication, ethics and equal opportunities, health secretary Alan Milburn said.

The move, linked to an 11 per cent increase in training budgets from April, is aimed at boosting the number of recruits and improving patient care by breaking down the barriers between professions.

As well as supporting multidisciplinary learning, it is also expected to improve the flexibility of workforce development.

Union head of nursing Karen Jennings welcomed the initiative but warned: 'It is important that the curriculum content is standard right across the UK and is not left to individual universities to develop.'

The way training is funded will also change, with the three existing NHS funding streams being brought together this April in a single multi-professional education and training levy (MPET).

An extra £252 million will be invested in training, which brings the total budget for 2001 to £2.5 billion and is expected to provide 'at least' 1,000 more training places for nurses.

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