Debate on CHC abolition needed

THE PLANNED abolition of community health councils would leave patients without an independent voice, RCN congress agreed by an overwhelming majority.

Members called for a national debate on patient empowerment after protesting at government plans to scrap CHCs.

Andrew Parker, of the Northampton branch, said: 'Anyone in this room could be on a CHC but none of you could get on the committees that they will set up to replace them.'

Plans to abolish CHCs have already been delayed but health secretary Alan Milburn remains determined to replace them with 'patient advocates' in each hospital if Labour wins the general election.

Support for whistle-blowers

THE PERSONAL and professional anguish suffered by people who blow the whistle on poor care standards was spelled out in an RCN Congress debate.

Mental health nurse Mandy Leaman told how she had needed to take antidepressants after she exposed poor practice.

'I was reduced from being an RMN to a jibbering wreck in front of my GP asking for antidepressants,' she said.

'But thanks to the help of my friends and some professional support, I managed to get through it, and now I know they can never hurt me again.'

Ms Leaman was speaking in support of a resolution calling on RCN Council to lead a campaign to ensure that nurses who blow the whistle on NHS services are given support and protection.

It was passed virtually unopposed.

Call for national living cost help

COST OF LIVING supplements currently handed out only in southern England should be given to nurses all over the UK, eight in ten nurses have said.

The resolution called on the RCN to lobby the government to extend the system. Some speakers argued this was necessary because house prices were high all over the UK. But others wanted the supplements replaced by across-the-board salary increases.

Buckinghamshire nurse Tricia Pullen said the supplements should also be given to healthcare assistants. 'The system is divisive. We're all worthy of a proper living wage.'

RCN practice nurses' association chair Sara Richards said: 'Many practice nurses haven't had an annual increase let alone cost of living supplements because they are employed by doctors.'

Some speakers said the supplements were necessary because they helped attract nurses to areas of greatest shortage.

Meanwhile, a fringe meeting heard that details of how NHS career ladders, job descriptions and pay rates will be overhauled should be announced within four months.

Nurses will be able to give their views on the plans, which would kick in early next year if they are approved by union members.

Foot and mouth trauma sparks mental health crisis

FARMERS AND their families face incalculable risks of mental health problems and suicide because the foot and mouth crisis has cost them their livelihoods, RCN Congress heard.

There is also the danger of worsening asthma and the spread of diseases such as E coli from burning of piles of carcasses, nurses speaking in an emergency debate warned.

Some nurses feared children would suffer trauma and flashbacks from seeing lifelong family pets slaughtered.

The resolution called for increased monitoring of rural communities devastated financially and psychologically by the outbreak. It was backed by 93 per cent of voting members.

This could mean phone calls or visits by health authorities to assess needs, or campaigns by the government encouraging farming communities to take health checks for mental health and respiratory problems, said Alan Mawbey of the North Devon branch, who introduced the resolution.

'The impact of this awful disease will last for years'

He added: 'It has been a nightmare for farmers and their families in isolated areas and no positive steps have been taken to monitor the population. There have been appalling scenes with farmers and their families kept in isolated farmhouses.'

Gloucestershire nurse Lisa Crooks said: 'There is a high risk of suicide among farming communities. I'm not allowed to visit patients on farms and they have to get a special permit to see me, then spend three hours disinfecting themselves and their car. I fear for the children too. I don't doubt there will be an affect on their mental health.'

Leading nurse academic Mike Walsh, who is based in Cumbria, said 150 incinerated cattle were stacked near his home giving off an unbearable stench for a week before they were removed. 'The impact of this awful disease will last for years.'

Dee Howkins, of the nurse practitioners association, who runs a mobile clinic, said: 'Since February I've had no access. Over 2,100 families have been affected in my area alone, not counting the 17 other industries dependent on agriculture.'

'They have had no income for months. They can't pay the bills and they delay the rent.'