Professional bodies responded this week to the government's plans for the new Nursing and Midwifery Council

RCN members call for ID cards to thwart impostors

By Christian Duffin

THE IDEA of requiring all nurses to have ID swipe cards with a photo and PIN number so that managers can identify impostors has been floated by the RCN.

The suggestion is contained in the RCN's response to the government's proposals for a new Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), which it wants to replace the UKCC and four national boards by next September. This week is the deadline for responses.

If the proposal put forward by some RCN members was adopted, nurses' details could be logged with NHS Direct so that any hospital, clinic or chemist would be able to check them around the clock.

'There have already been a number of cases where impostors have obtained current registration details of a nurse and used this to pass themselves off as being both qualified and registered,' said RCN policy adviser Helen Caulfield.

The RCN is vehemently opposed to the government's intention to appoint the new council's president, who would chair meetings, rather than the post being elected. But the RCN welcomes plans for the composition of the council to be 12 nurses and midwives, and 11 lay members. It says the 12 nursing representatives should comprise three nurses and three midwives from England and one of each from the other three countries. Five of the 11 lay representatives should be from England and two each from the other three countries.

The RCN has been in meetings with Unison, the Royal College of Midwives, the Community Practitioners' and Health Visitors' Association and NHS managers to discuss some common concerns. These include how the NMC would cope with increased workloads and the definition of 'lay members'. Some ideas will be presented as joint proposals.

The RCN does not want separate statutory committees to deal with nursing and midwifery issues. It also worries that the NMC may undermine rather than enhance patient protection.

'The government's plans for the new Nursing and Midwifery Council

- It should be up and running by September 2001.
- Misconduct would be judged on the principle of 'on the balance of probabilities' rather than 'beyond reasonable doubt', as it is now.
- There should be 12 practitioners - four nurses, four health visitors and four midwives - and 11 'lay' members on the new council.
- It will come under the proposed UK Council for Health Regulators, which will develop common codes of conduct across all health regulatory bodies.

Warning of political 'straitjacket'

The UKCC president has claimed that the government's plans will undermine rather than enhance patient protection.

Nurses removed from the register for misconduct would be able to carry on working for up to a year if they are allowed to appeal after a disciplinary hearing, UKCC president Alison Norman said.

She warned that the new structure proposed by the government to replace the UKCC was too politicised. The Nursing and Midwifery Council would be inhibited by a 'government straitjacket', putting patients at risk, she added.

Another fear is that the NMC will not be ready to function on its scheduled first day next September. This could cause a further backlog of fitness to practise cases.

Ms Norman said: 'We want to see greater public protection, openness and transparency and greater consumer and practitioner involvement enshrined in legislation. What we don't want is a new regulatory body undermined from the start by an unrealistic and unworkable change process and timetable.' She said she hoped the government would make radical changes before issuing its final plans in the new year.

The UKCC also believes practitioners will face a substantial increase in their registration fee due to the loss of government funding currently paid to the national boards, which are to be scrapped.

Unions cautious over proposals

- UNISON WELCOMES plans to increase lay membership, but stresses that lay members should not be from other health professions.

- It is opposed to lessening the burden of proof in misconduct cases from 'beyond reasonable doubt' to the 'on the balance of probabilities' and rejects plans to give nurses the right of appeal after being removed from the registers.

- 'There's already a backlog of professional misconduct cases,' said professional officer Peter Marshall.

- 'This could lead to even more hearings.'

- IN ITS response the Royal College of Midwives says: 'The proposed mode of regulation will inhibit the midwife as a skilled and confident practitioner.'

The 2:1 ratio of nurses to midwives on the board will restrict midwives' representation and the current separate registration of midwives could disappear.

The absence of a statutory committee on midwifery will reduce the prestige of midwifery further, it says.

- THE COMMUNITY Practitioners' and Health Visitors' Association (CPHVA) is furious that health visitors have been excluded from the title of the council.

- 'The government is not clear about what health visiting is;' said lead professional officer Obi Amadi. 'Health visitors should have a separate register.'

- The CPHVA has reservations about the accountability of the council and wants the four UK countries to be fairly represented.

- Ms Amadi added: 'We want to make sure the process of appointments is transparent and equitable.'