Hungry for action

For Elizabeth Smith, a continuing professional development article highlighted the importance of nutrition in nursing homes.

Reading the article on nutrition in nursing homes (Clay 2001) has made me more aware of the basic nutritional care that each individual is entitled to when they enter a nursing home.

I have taken the opportunity to study the daily menu at the nursing home where I work. There appeared on each occasion to be a good variety of food and it seemed to cater for the various special diets of residents.

There are many reasons why a resident may lose weight, whether it be a sudden or a gradual process. While it is important to try to establish the cause and treat appropriately, this may be difficult when the resident has dementia, confusion or expressive dysphasia. Close observation by all staff at all times may reveal the cause. A comprehensive nutritional assessment by a trained nurse on admission would prove invaluable and give a good insight into residents' eating habits. Good nutritional status will help protect the person against infection, promote better wound healing, and hopefully lead to residents feeling much happier.

Since reading this article I feel my knowledge of nutritional care for older people has improved and I know more about the importance of screening and assessment on admission into our care.

Appetites

I also feel empowered to improve the current resident assessment form and improve documentation of all residents' weights. I would like to undertake some research into the effects on resident's appetites of being exposed to sunlight and fresh air before meal times.

I intend to design a pamphlet specifically for care staff to empower them with regard to the nutritional needs of the residents and problems encountered with specific disorders. I hope this will broaden their knowledge and in turn help them to report back critical information to the qualified staff.

Elizabeth Smith works in a nursing home in Shropshire.

This practice profile is based on NS74 Clay M (2001) Nutritious, enjoyable food in nursing homes. Nursing Standard. 15, 19, 47-53

Write a practice profile

You can gain ten RCN continuing education points by reading a Nursing Standard continuing professional development article and writing a practice profile. Turn to page 45 for this week's article and on page 54 you can find out how to present and submit your practice profile.

Just hanging on the telephone

Karen Young had high hopes when she joined a nursing agency, but the large number of shifts she was promised failed to materialise.

When a nurse joins an agency, the first thing he or she is promised is the flood of work that will be coming their way. "Great," you think. "No more worries about being able to pay the bills each week."

For the first week or so the phone rings regularly, and then the calls dwindle. You ring in with availability and are assured something will come in soon. Two days go by, then three and nothing materialises. So you resort to phoning round where you have previously worked asking them if they are all right for staff.

When you finally do receive a shift from the agency, you arrive for duty but, more than once, you find out your shift has been cancelled and no one has bothered to tell you.

The work you secure goes well if you are prepared to talk to off-hand staff who generally find agency nurses more trouble than they are worth because everything has to be explained to them. You remind yourself that it must be hard for them and for the patients not having continuity of care, and you do your best.

Due to the strict payment conditions of the agencies you make sure your time sheet is in on time and completed correctly - only to find out that it has been lost somewhere.

This happens so often you begin wondering why you bother. When the payment arrives a fee has been charged for having it sent to your home, and you realise the rate is wrong or they have paid you for too few hours.

Nursing agencies are a necessity in the present climate of acute nurse shortages, but their treatment of nurses can be dismal. If you have to join an agency my advice is try to work in just a couple of places. Get to know the staff well, and when the off-duty is being written, make sure they know your availability and cut out the middle person.

Karen Young is an agency nurse in Nottingham.