Fear that ministers are getting cold feet over cost of pay and grading shake-up

Unions seek commitment over new grading system

By Christian Duffin and Karen Murray

NURSING UNIONS met health secretary Alan Milburn this week to seek his renewed commitment to a new pay and grading system for all NHS nurses.

The talks were taking place as Nursing Standard went to press amid fears that ministers are getting cold feet over the potential cost of the new system.

The proposed system has been the subject of complex negotiations involving the four UK governments, NHS managers and the major nursing unions over the past two and a half years.

The process was due to be completed this month, but it emerged recently that ministers would not be prepared to sign off any deal until the Treasury has completed its latest spending review in June.

Union officials met health department civil servants last week to discuss the timetable of negotiations, but made no real progress. A department spokesperson would only say: 'We are still discussing the timetable with the unions.'

RCN stewards attending their annual conference in London at the weekend voiced their concern and frustration over the potential delay.

The college's acting director of employment relations John Humphreys said the mood of the stewards was 'like a rumbling volcano', and warned that their anger could spill over if Mr Milburn reneged on his commitment to a new system.

In an address to the stewards' conference, RCN general secretary Beverly Malone said it was time for the government to 'show us the money'.

'It's been a long haul and we're right up at the front door,' she said.

'We are working hard to keep the pay modernisation negotiations on track and on time. We have come too far to turn back now.'

The issue was also raised at the Community Practitioners' and Health Visitors' Association's annual conference in Bournemouth. NHS research officer for the CPHVAS's parent union MSF Colin Adkins said there was a danger of staff becoming cynical if the negotiations dragged on too long.

However, MSF officer Roger Spiller said the delay may be a sign that the new grading system is more generous than ministers had expected.

The nurses' pay review body is expected to conclude its deliberations this week. Its report should be sent to ministers this month and an announcement of next April's pay award is anticipated in early December.

Practice nurses to get equal pay

GPS HAVE been told they must give practice nurses the same pay rises as those awarded to nurses employed directly by the NHS.

Family doctors will be reimbursed for any additional costs involved by their health authority, primary care trust or primary care group.

Although GPS will not be legally bound to give practice nurses an annual pay award in line with the NHS, the new arrangements mean they will have no choice but to do so.

Announcing the move, health minister John Hutton said: 'By bringing pay for practice nurses into line with colleagues in other parts of the NHS, we are sending out a clear message that they are just as valued as nurses working in hospitals, while encouraging more of them to come into the profession.

'This will have a positive effect on morale in the workplace.'

RCN general secretary Beverly Malone said the announcement was good news and pointed out that unions have campaigned on the issue for years. 'We will be monitoring how effective this is. Mr Milburn recognises that the current situation is unjust and shouldn't continue—and we welcome this.'

Sole survivor puts feet up

Nurse Mary Murphy marked her 60th birthday by walking across hot coals as part of a fundraising effort on behalf of the Sue Ryder care home where she works. But she's not a contortionist— the feet are those of a colleague who was also about to take part

TV series based at Bristol trust

NURSES AT North Bristol NHS Trust are the focus of a new 25-part documentary series being shown on cable, satellite and digital channel Living TV.

The fly-on-the-wall series, which features Sharon Porter (pictured above with a patient), is simply entitled Nurses. It also features a nurse receiving a diagnosis of breast cancer, and highlights two births, a bungee jump and a single parent struggling to juggle A&E shifts with his family life. Trust director of nursing Julie Burgess said: 'This gives a real insight into what it's like to be a nurse.'

£100 per week for nursing care

THE NURSING needs of all 2,400 nursing home residents in Wales are to be funded by the NHS at a flat rate of £100 a week.

The funding arrangements, announced by health minister Jane Hutt this week, will come into effect early next month.

They contrast sharply with those in England, which are based on a banding system in which residents receive £35, £70 or £110 a week. They also exceed the £65 weekly flat rate set by the Scottish Executive.

Announcing the £1 million funding package, Ms Hutt said: 'This is a fair, reasonable and affordable contribution from the NHS towards care costs.'

The RCN welcomed the announcement, but RCN Welsh board secretary Liz Hewett said: 'We believe that £100 is not enough.'