ITU Staff Ratios Challenged

Ventilated patients in ITU may require less intensive nursing care than those who can breathe unaided in the same unit, according to new research. The findings cast doubt over the current staffing levels and skill mix in ITUs, and have prompted calls for a more flexible system of assessing workloads in critical care.

Researchers from the University of Birmingham videotaped 49 shifts in two ITUs over a 16-day period. They found nurses spent more time with high dependency patients than with those who had intensive care needs.

And they found a high percentage of the nursing activities carried out by qualified nursing staff were of a low skill level, ‘not always commensurate with their training or skill levels’. Co-author Renee Adomat, nursing lecturer at the university’s school of health sciences, said much of what the nurses were doing could have been undertaken by skilled assistants. ‘Our study shows that, despite being trained to deal with patients’ complex care needs, nurses spent a percentage of their time carrying out low skill activity, including emptying bins and cleaning mattresses.’

Writing in the Journal of Advanced Nursing the researchers conclude that patients in need of ITU care ‘do not appear to need one-to-one care’ and call for a new approach to staffing such units.

RCN adviser in nursing practice Rosie Wilkinson said the research is significant because in the past it has proved notoriously difficult to assess the staffing needs of people in critical care areas.

Taskforce Will Promote Refugee Registration

A new taskforce has been launched to help refugee nurses register in the UK and integrate into the workplace.

Set up by the Employability Forum and Praxis, a London-based refugee charity, the taskforce will provide information for the nurses and promote understanding and awareness of the potential contribution refugee nurses could make to the NHS and private sectors.

Employability Forum director Patrick Wintour said going abroad to recruit nurses does not make sense when there are many refugee nurses already here. ‘It must make economic sense compared to the greater costs of recruiting nurses from overseas,’ he said.

Many refugee nurses have difficulty registering with the Nursing and Midwifery Council because they no longer have the documentation supporting their registration.

For more information call 020 7981 0375.

Long-term Underfunding of Ireland’s Health Service Results in Delays and Closures

Patients Neglected as Irish Services Reach Crisis Point

By Colin Parish

Nurses and ministers in the Republic of Ireland held talks last week to discuss the growing crisis in the country’s health service.

Junior health minister Michéal Martin met representatives of the Irish Nurses Organisation (INO) and the Irish Congress of Trade Unions.

The INO is becoming increasingly alarmed at the poor state of the Irish health service, which it says is leading to some patients spending their entire stay in hospital on A&E department trolleys.

A spokesperson for the minister said the meeting was held to discuss ‘a number of issues relating to the reform and restructuring of the health service’.

The INO says cutbacks have led to extended waiting times and bed closures, and to some hospitals cancelling elective admissions. Yet the Irish government says it is putting record funds into the health service.

‘This crisis has been 20 years in the making. The system has never recovered’

NOEL TREANOR, the INO’s industrial relations officer, said the current crisis was a result of new budget allocations that have come on top of years of neglect. He said although budgets had been increased they were not keeping track with increased costs. ‘This crisis has been 20 years in the making. In the mid 1980s there were swingeing cutbacks and the Irish health system has never recovered. Most admissions are now through A&E and we have appalling trolley waits.’

In one Dublin hospital it is routine for between ten and 20 patients to have spent the night on a trolley, he said, with more than one trolley in a cubicle. ‘In that situation there is no dignity for the patient and it’s a heartbreaking effort on behalf of the nurses. All these patients need to be admitted but there are not enough beds for them.’

Mr Treanor said rehabilitation beds and those for older patients are full because there are no step-down facilities available. ‘Frontline nurses are feeling frustrated by their inability to do the type of nursing they are employed to do.’

He said unless extra money is made available to fund more beds, the INO will launch a campaign highlighting the critical situation and encourage the public to resist any further cuts.

The Irish Department of Health and Children acknowledges there are ‘issues of difficulty’. Speaking at a recent Irish Association of Directors of Nursing and Midwifery conference, health minister Ivor Callely said the government is investing £9.2 billion a year in the health service. ‘The health services are receiving an increase of 12 per cent on the 2002 estimate. No government in the history of the state has invested so much in the health services.’