NMC to toughen standards before granting access to national formulary

By Christian Duffin and Bill Doult

Tough, revamped prescribing standards for nurses and midwives are set to be introduced within weeks.

The Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) wants to introduce the changes before nurses attain the right to prescribe from the British National Formulary. UK-wide standards of practice are also being considered.

The NMC proposes giving maths and the legal issues surrounding prescribing extra prominence on a revamped 38-day course and test.

The strengthened course will ultimately mean greater protection for patients, NMC prescribing lead Liz Plastow told Nursing Standard.

Perfect maths

Details have not been finalised, but one NMC proposal is for candidates to score 100 per cent on the maths section of the assessment. The qualification may be called a ‘licence’ to prescribe.

‘It is important a high standard of care is maintained and that this continues to be strictly regulated,’ Ms Plastow said.

‘It is for this reason the NMC is reviewing and strengthening the standards for nurse and midwifery prescribing to coincide with current changes.’

Baroness Julia Cumberlege, a former Conservative health minister whose work led to district nurses and health visitors being able to prescribe, is concerned that nurses will be discouraged from prescribing if the course and standards are too demanding.

‘In the past, we found the prescribing courses gave more information to nurses than even junior doctors were getting,’ she said. ‘Clearly, we need standards and good courses, but I hope the NMC does not over-egg the pudding in its conscientious approach so that nurses become reluctant to prescribe.’

The nationwide prescribing standards are likely to cover areas such as pharmacology, diagnosis, legal policy and the ethics of prescribing.

The NMC will finalise the standards and course changes at a council meeting next month.

Mounting pressure

Meanwhile, health secretary Patricia Hewitt is under mounting pressure to speed up the legal changes needed to clear the way for nurse prescribing.

A cross-party group led by nurse MP Laura Moffatt has laid a Commons motion urging ministers to prepare the wording for new regulations. ‘We want to ensure that these proposals are implemented in full through regulations as soon as possible,’ Ms Moffatt said.

She told Nursing Standard she is keen to reassure doctors that nurses will be suitably qualified and competent to use their extended prescribing powers safely.

A spokesperson for the Department of Health said an amendment to the Prescriptions of Medicines order to extend nurse prescribing will be likely to occur in a parliamentary session in May.

Some universities are helping to tackle hardship among degree level nursing students by enrolling them first on diploma courses.

By doing this the students can claim a non-means-tested bursary for the first two years at college, giving them more cash than students who enrol directly on to degree courses.

After the second year, the most academically able students can transfer to the degree course. Those who do then receive a means-tested bursary.

Jaki Smart, dean of Buckinghamshire Chilterns University College faculty of health studies, one of the colleges involved, said it was an approach that suited nursing students and also helped them financially.

Ms Smart said the local strategic health authority and the NHS Student Grants Unit are happy with the arrangements.

Council of Deans executive officer Paul Turner said: ‘This is the kind of flexibility we would welcome.’

RCN student adviser Susan Watts said it was a sensible approach, but a major issue is that most students do not realise there is two-tier funding when they sign up for the degree.

Figures from the Universities and Colleges Admissions Service show that nursing is now the fifth most popular degree subject in the UK. The number of applications for nursing degrees rose by 15.4 per cent over the past year, despite a 3.4 per cent fall in the total number of applications.

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