A clinical nurse specialist who set up a nurse-led screening service for the early detection of skin cancer has been named RCN Northern Ireland nurse of the year 2009.

Iona McCormack, based at Belfast City Hospital, established the service after malignant melanoma incidents tripled in Northern Ireland over the past 20 years. RCN Northern Ireland director Janice Smyth said: 'Through her pioneering clinic Iona has raised the profile of skin cancers and made a significant contribution to patient care.'

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Employers consider scheme to bar underperforming students

Exclusive by Petra Kendall-Raynor

A system introduced by an NHS trust that sees underperforming nursing students barred from placements could be rolled out across England.

The Heart of England NHS Foundation Trust is believed to be the first health organisation in the UK to set up its own scrutiny panel for nursing students.

Practice education facilitators from across the UK recently warned the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) that universities are allowing nursing students to continue their training against the advice of staff who oversee practice placements.

Patient protection

A trust source said the panel, which has been operating for around 18 months, was set up to protect the public and safeguard the reputation of the organisation.

The source revealed that a small number of nursing students, who cannot appeal decisions, have been barred from work placements.

Neither higher education institutions (HEIs) or students can appear before the panel, the source said. ‘We make every effort to support students who are having difficulty but sometimes people are not competent and it is in everyone’s best interests for them not to continue.

‘There could be problems with the fact that the student does not attend the panel hearing and cannot appeal its decision. But if a panel like this is done properly, it could work well.’

NMC guidance states that, from this year, all HEIs must have a fitness to practise panel to assess nursing students. NMC professional adviser for education Garth Long said any additional panels should not compromise the HEIs’ position, and that health organisations and HEIs should work together.

Council of Deans of Health chair Sue Bernhauser stressed that most nursing students are fit to carry out work placements.

‘This is the very last step after other avenues have been explored but I do think this is something that other trusts could use.’

NHS Employers deputy head of employment services Caroline Waterfield welcomed the Heart of England trust’s initiative and said she will contact it for further details.

‘The trust appears to have a formalised process for checking the safety of nursing students for patients. I would need to see the details but this seems to be something that could be used elsewhere.’

But RCN student adviser Gill Robertson raised concerns about the format of the panel. ‘There could be problems with the fact that the student does not attend the panel hearing and cannot appeal its decision. But if a panel like this is done properly, it could work well.’

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Shawn health minister Anne Milton has indicated that the Conservatives may retain diploma-level courses if they win power at the next election.

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