Talk of cottage hospitals and moving more care to the community is absurd

RCN congress in Liverpool last week was a wonderful opportunity to debate the issues that matter. But, my goodness, I have never known morale to be so low.

A great deal of the debate has focused on community nursing, and in particular the RCN’s warning that district nurses are disappearing so fast that by 2025 they will ‘face extinction’ (News June 18).

Numbers working in the NHS in England have almost halved in the past decade. This fall is so serious that district nurses are described as a ‘critically endangered’ species.

There has been much talk of the imposition of timed visits to people’s homes and the pressures that these impose on nurses and their patients. The district nurse is often the only friendly face that a patient might see in the whole day. It is so unfortunate when visits are restricted to a few minutes.

Simon Stevens, the new head of NHS England, wants us to go back to cottage hospitals and for more care to be provided in the community. But where are we going to get the nurses for this when more and more are leaving and insufficient nurses are being trained as district nurse specialists?

At RCN congress, I met one nurse who had been seeing up to 28 patients a day and working many more hours a week than she was paid for. Her breaks were taken up meeting managers and catching up with paperwork. She is now a practice nurse, and finding life much less stressful.

Helen Evans, by email

TO DESCRIBE DISTRICT NURSING AS ENDANGERED IS TOO PESSIMISTIC

The RCN’s survey of district and community nurses reflects many of the trends that the report from the Queen’s Nursing Institute (QNI) has identified (News June 18). However, we at the QNI also believe that there are a number of positive recent trends in places within district nursing.

Our 2013 report on district nursing education served as a wake-up call. We have just repeated this survey, and will publish the results shortly.

The research indicates that more universities are offering district nursing courses than a year ago, with more students enrolled. Our new report, 2020 Vision: Five Years On, also highlights the strength of district nurses’ identity, and their key role in community health care.

I have experienced first-hand the incredible work that district nurses do day in, day out. My aunt recently chose to live with me for her end of life care. She died with her family around her, in the comfort of a familiar home environment. The community services worked seamlessly together, with district nurses the key co-ordinators and providers of compassionate and competent care.

Chief nursing officer for England Jane Cummings’ community nursing strategy recognises formally the importance of district nursing.

We acknowledge that a huge amount still needs to be done, but to suggest that district nursing is in danger of extinction ignores much of the practical work being undertaken to ensure that it remains central to high-quality health care.

Crystal Oldman, chief executive, The Queen’s Nursing Institute, London

PATIENTS HARDEST HIT BY DISTRICT NURSING RECRUITMENT CRISIS

District nurses and health visitors are facing yet more cutbacks, their workloads are rising and they have less time to care for patients (News June 18). Their travelling time is often not factored in properly, and their mileage rates are less than generous.

More than a third of district nurses in England are nearing retirement age. As they leave the profession, patients lose out on their experience and skills.