SAFE STAFFING WORRIES PROMPT CALLS FOR A SUSTAINABLE NHS WORKFORCE PLAN

Unison members have called on the government to develop a sustainable workforce plan in response to growing concerns about safe nurse staffing.

During a debate at the union’s health conference in Brighton last week, Glasgow and Clyde region member Una Provan highlighted Unison’s safe nurse staffing survey, in which 86% of nurses reported that elements of care were not carried out on their last shift.

‘It means our members, who are highly skilled professionals, are not able to provide the level of care our patients deserve,’ Ms Provan said.

She added that NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde health board has more than 600 nursing vacancies and nurses regularly have to work more than 60 hours a week.

‘From Brighton to Glasgow and the Shetlands, we need legislation on safe staffing levels, whether in the community or hospitals.’

Unison members voted in favour of tackling workforce challenges on several fronts – such as the threat of losing staff to retirement over the next five years, and paying students a salary while they undertake their training.

West Midlands member Gary Freeman criticised the government’s plan to axe the nursing bursary and replace it with loans.

He said nursing students will end up with debts of between £47,000 and £59,000 at the end of their training, adding: ‘The government wants to take £1.2 billion out of public spending for Health Education England and put it onto the backs of students.’

The union also called for new nursing roles to meet the demands of the ageing population, and for the use of overseas nurses to be maintained.

Unison will fight health-related benefit sanctions

The rights of people who misuse drugs or alcohol or those who are obese to refuse treatment is under threat because of a review commissioned by the government, Unison members have warned.

Dame Carol Black, an expert on work and health, is expected to publish her report within months.

Part of her remit is to review the effect that alcohol and drug addiction and obesity have on people’s job opportunities.

This includes considering whether welfare benefits could be linked to patients consenting to appropriate treatment or support.

At Unison’s health conference last week, members said this could lead to patients having their benefits withdrawn if they refuse treatment.

They voted in favour of a motion that said the principle of consent for treatment is under threat, that consent must be free from undue influence and that any move to coerce people into having treatment could diminish the trust between patients and healthcare professionals.

Nurse Emma Corlett told the conference: ‘I cannot see someone with diabetes being sanctioned if they don’t take their insulin properly.’

Another member said some people will struggle because they are too ill to have insight into their mental health problems.

She said: ‘They may be so poorly that they struggle to face the day and get out of bed.’

HOSPITAL NURSES SURVIVE ON DIET OF FAST FOOD

Poor quality hospital food risks the health of NHS workers, a survey from Unison and the Campaign for Better Hospital Food warns.

The survey reveals nurses and other health employees are being forced to resort to fast food or vending machine snacks at work, all of which are high in fat, salt and sugar.

A total of 3,650 NHS employees responded – more than one quarter (29%) of whom work night shifts – yet almost half (49%) of hospital canteens close before 8pm.

Just over half of respondents admit they would not be prepared to eat the meals served to patients either.

Unison general secretary Dave Prentis called for an ‘urgent overhaul’ of NHS food and said of night shift workers: ‘Nurses and other NHS workers often have no choice but to resort to meals that are high in salt, fat and sugar. Takeaways and fizzy pop don’t make for a healthy workforce.’