Funding cuts threaten the NHS public health agenda

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‘Aggressive’ public health cuts are putting patients at risk, frontline nurses have warned.

Those who responded to an RCN poll revealed they have seen patients who are malnourished or in food poverty, living in unsafe housing or without heating.

The survey comes a year after chancellor George Osborne announced £200 million in cuts to the public health budget.

Research shows people living in deprived communities are more likely to suffer ill health, mainly due to poor diet, smoking and alcohol. Half of the nurses surveyed say they believe that the proportion of patients requiring care for preventable conditions has increased during their career.

One nurse said: ‘The elderly are becoming more socially isolated due to financial constraints from the government, which impacts on their physical and mental health.’

Another said: ‘I work with the homeless and drug and alcohol abusers, and have seen their lives become more difficult due to lack of resources and services.’

An analysis by the Faculty of Public Health warned the knock-on effects of the cuts would cost the NHS about £1 billion.

The RCN said the cuts were making long-standing health issues worse. General secretary Janet Davies said: ‘There is a widening divide between people who are living long and healthy lives and those who are struggling.

‘The RCN’s major worry is that efforts to tackle the issues and to help people live healthier lives are in danger of going backwards.’

The RCN survey of nurses and healthcare assistants found:

- 20 years more ‘good health’ among people in most affluent areas than those in the poorest areas of England
- 43% said their work was being affected by heightened pressure on public services
- 38% have cared for patients affected by malnutrition or food poverty
- 41% have seen patients affected by inadequate or unsafe housing
- 21% have seen patients affected by a lack of heating

All nurses should receive training in domestic abuse awareness and know how to support victims, RCN members at congress agreed. They overwhelmingly supported a resolution asking RCN council to lobby for mandatory domestic abuse awareness training for all healthcare workers. Nursing Standard nurse of the year 2015 Amanda Burston said: ‘Domestic abuse is growing and evolving. It is time for health to take a lead to educate its nurse workforce.’

Winter pressures is a ‘fading phenomenon’, with high demand and major incidents ‘the new normal’ all year long, according to the RCN. Across England, financial pressures and increased demand are affecting the entire hospital system, with A&E units showing the greatest strain, said RCN general secretary Janet Davies. ‘It is time we had a serious look at how long hospitals can continue to function when they are consistently under-funded and under-staffed,’ she said.

Legislation intended to tackle drug misuse is not fit for purpose, according to nurses who treat people with addictions. In an item for discussion at RCN congress, RCN Lothian branch member Geoff Earl claimed the Misuse of Drugs Act was a ‘big stick’ that should be replaced by education and treatment.

Nursing student Stephanie Morris added that current policies deter vulnerable people from seeking help as they fear being punished.