Concern over high number of older nurses struck off

By Erin Dean

Four out of five nurses struck off the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) register last year were over the age of 40.

Older nurses also made up 76% of new cases sent to the regulator last year, despite representing only 66% of the workforce.

The figures were revealed in the NMC’s annual equality and diversity report for 2015-16.

Statistics show that older nurses are disproportionately represented in NMC cases.

Although investigations, such as the Francis Inquiry into care failings at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust, have focused on educational standards for newly qualified staff, only 7% of the 4,512 new fitness to practise (FtP) cases sent to the NMC in 2015-16 concerned staff aged 19-29. Nurses in this age group make up 13% of the register as a whole.

A total of 480 (11%) of the total cases concerned nurses who were aged over 60. This age group represents 8% of the register.

The report states that 16% of nurses who were struck off were aged over 60 – double their proportion of the workforce.

Concerns about the high numbers of older nurses in FtP proceedings have been raised before, including by Nursing Standard in 2013.

Skewed figures
RCN employment relations adviser Nicola Lee said there was no evidence that nurses become less competent in their work as they get older.

‘We know that many of our older workers over the age of 60 predominantly work in nursing homes and the independent sector, and there are disproportionate numbers of referrals from these settings, where they...’
seem to use FtP referrals in the absence of performance management.

‘Older nurses are also less likely to have the opportunity to take up training and development opportunities.’

**Work stress**

Joanna Goodrich, head of evidence and learning at the Point of Care Foundation, which leads work in providing emotional support to healthcare staff, said overstretched older nurses may be struggling with stress and burnout.

‘Older nurses are feeling moral distress that they aren’t able to give the care that they want to provide, and they find it demoralising,’ she said.

‘A good team can buffer nurses from stress, but many teams don’t even have time for a 10-minute meeting, especially those in the community.

‘Good management practices can help with stress, such as having supervision, debriefs, appraisals, and being part of a team working towards the same goals and objectives. These initiatives can be quick to implement, such as a daily 10-minute team huddle.’

The NMC, which has a duty to be non-discriminatory in its work, has commissioned research looking at why some groups are over-represented in FtP proceedings. It is due to be published in the new year.

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**NURSING ASSOCIATES**

Health secretary agrees nursing associate role should be regulated by the NMC

Health secretary Jeremy Hunt has conceded the nursing associate role should be subject to professional regulation.

The role, which will require 2 years of training and involve hands-on care delivery, is intended to sit between that of a healthcare assistant and registered nurse. Nursing associates will also be able to administer medicines, but only if suitably trained and competent.

Mr Hunt, pictured, said statutory professional regulation should be a requirement for the new role, under the stewardship of the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC).

He added that allowing nursing associates to administer medicines ‘means that a stronger regime of assurance is necessary to ensure safe and effective clinical practice’.

‘Nursing associates are not there to replace registered nurses, but to support and complement them,’ he told the NHS Providers annual conference and exhibition last week. ‘But I have listened carefully to what has been said and agree that, on balance, statutory professional regulation is a necessary and proportionate requirement.’

NMC chief executive Jackie Smith said the regulator was ‘well equipped’ to take on this task, but the decision will be made at a council meeting on 25 January.

The first 11 test sites will begin training 1,000 nursing associates in December. Sites for the second wave in 2017 were announced by Health Education England last week. Among the 24 acute, community and mental health trusts, care homes, hospices and educational institutions are NHS Gloucestershire Clinical Commissioning Group, Imperial College Healthcare NHS Trust and Heart of England NHS Foundation Trust.