Editorial

With nurse numbers down, policy makers must act before it’s too late

The consequences of decades of poor workforce planning are starting to be felt in earnest. For the first time in recent history, the number of nurses and midwives on the UK register has fallen, albeit by a relatively modest number.

But the implications of the trend continuing for long would be serious.

Figures released by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) this week show a drop of 5,047 registrants over the 14 months to May this year. This represents only 0.73% of the total number, but cannot be brushed aside as a statistical blip.

To its credit, the NMC undertook a survey of more than 4,500 nurses and midwives to discover why they left. Unsurprisingly, retirement was the largest single reason, followed by working conditions (including staffing levels), changes in personal circumstances and disillusionment with the quality of care provided to patients. Poor pay was not far behind.

This failure to retain staff is a waste of resources and talent, and represents an abject failure of policy makers and those responsible for ensuring there are enough suitably qualified staff to deliver care of a high standard.

Last week, NHS Improvement announced that it will be working closely with 20 employers in England to analyse their staff turnover and design bespoke plans aimed at reducing the number of leavers. At least that’s a start, but a stronger, longer-term response is needed to prevent an insurmountable crisis.

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