An RCN survey reveals improved recognition of patient needs, but low staffing levels prevent optimum practice. Erin Dean reports

Dementia care impeded by workloads

Nurses are being prevented from giving the best care to patients with dementia in hospital because their workload is too great and staffing is too low, the RCN has discovered.

The college surveyed more than 700 healthcare professionals, the vast majority nurses, in the UK to find out how they are meeting the challenges of providing better care to people with dementia.

The survey, headed by RCN dementia project lead Rachel Thompson, is part of a drive supported by the Department of Health to guide care in acute settings.

She says: ‘Overall the findings show an improved recognition that patients with dementia can have different needs to other patients in hospital and that nurses are motivated to make positive changes.’

‘However to provide good quality care, nurses need time with patients to give them personalised support when they are distressed. There was a strong message from healthcare professionals that high workloads and low staffing levels act as barriers to providing good care.’

When researchers asked what prevents the delivery of good care, 75 per cent identified workload pressures and insufficient staffing levels. Half stated that moving patients between wards makes care worse.

Respondents said the most important improvement to care that could be made was involving families, followed closely by the training and development of staff.

Ms Thompson presented the findings at RCN congress in Liverpool this week. She says the results will feed into practical advice for staff, due to be published in September, and adds that guidance is needed on safe staffing levels.

Successful ideas

Survey participants, recruited via RCN networks and external organisations, were asked to provide details of initiatives that had improved care. Respondents identified an RCN and Alzheimer’s Society project called, This is Me, which records personal information about patients with dementia.

A similar project, called About Me, was drawn up by nurse Ruth Chauhan. She said the initiative helps personalise care, allowing nurses to see the person behind the dementia.

June Andrews, director of the Dementia Services Development Centre at the University of Stirling, says dementia patients can cause disturbances on wards because they are frequently not given sufficient pain relief.

‘Hospitals can be a nightmare for a patient with dementia,’ she said. ‘They are chaotic places and patients with dementia have a reduced capacity to cope.’

Alzheimer’s Society policy manager Louise Lakey says that providing training for nurses will help them work more effectively and efficiently with patients, alleviating some of the pressure caused by high workloads.

She adds: ‘Nurses know that they will work with patients with dementia, but have not had the training. They desperately want training so they can do their job well’

Survey results

- 75 per cent of respondents said workloads were barriers to providing good care.
- 71 per cent said involving family and carers was important.
- 69 per cent said improving training for staff is important.
- 43 per cent said inappropriate hospital environments, such as poor lighting, impedes care.”