Lack of clinical teachers puts health visitors target in doubt

Exclusive by Erin Dean

Students training to be health visitors could struggle to secure placements due to clinical teacher shortages, say universities and nursing leaders.

Local health services are finding it difficult to attract enough health visitors to act as placement teachers in some areas of England, according to a snapshot survey by Nursing Standard.

The universities of Huddersfield, Brighton and London South Bank all said local health services are having difficulties in providing placements because of the depleted workforce.

Universities are rapidly increasing student places to meet the government’s target of 4,200 new health visitors by 2015.

Birmingham City University associate dean Louise Toner said increased funding has been made available, but “there needs to be more health visitors in practice before there can be a larger number undertaking the practice teacher programme.”

However, most of the 14 higher education institutions that responded to Nursing Standard’s survey are confident about providing placements for their students.

Mentorship model

Dame Liz Fradd, the nurse who chairs the government’s health visiting taskforce, said placement shortages were discussed when the group met for the first time last week. “There will need to be more innovative ways of supporting health visitors, such as mentorship, rather than using the traditional model of practice teachers,” she said.

The Department of Health set up the taskforce to provide leadership and to ask ‘difficult’ questions about health visitor workforce development over the next two years, according to Professor Fradd, an independent health service adviser.

Taskforce members include RCN general secretary Peter Carter and Nursing and Midwifery Council chief executive Dickon Weir-Hughes.

Professor Fradd said ensuring jobs are available for newly trained health visitors will be key. Statistics on the take-up of health visitor university places and numbers of newly qualified professionals finding work will be provided at every meeting, she added.

The group, which will meet four times a year, is keen to ensure the focus on health visiting does not have a negative effect on other areas of the nursing profession.

This follows reports highlighted by Nursing Standard that school nurses are being enticed on to health visiting courses to meet the government’s health visitor target. “We need to move away from numbers and get people to focus on improving the quality of health visiting,” Professor Fradd said.

Nurses to be debriefed after attacks

Norway’s nurses are preparing for a surge in patients requiring psychiatric care after at least 76 people were killed in bomb and gun attacks last month.

Norwegian Nurses Organisation (NNO) president Lisbeth Normann told Nursing Standard that one of the biggest challenges facing the nation’s nurses will be coping with their own emotional distress.

“It is important that we are taking care of the carers,” she said. “We need to take more time to debrief staff in the acute unit to make sure they can go on in a professional way.”

Ms Normann said the hospitals’ immediate response to the attacks was well organised. She is helping to draft an action plan with local authorities on how to meet long-term pressures caused by the tragedy.

“We need the system to be sustainable to ensure staff competencies are right,” she said.

Discussions on the action plan will also focus on ensuring there are sufficient mental health and community nurses to help young people in schools, colleges and universities who may experience psychological distress at some time in the future, she added.

The RCN was among nursing organisations that sent messages of support to the NNO.