Hold employers to account for referrals

The biggest single reason behind the proposed increase in Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) registration fees is the soaring cost of dealing with registrants accused of misconduct. The publication this week of the nurse regulator’s annual report on its fitness to practise activity sheds some light on why the current system is in urgent need of reform.

MANAGERS LEAVE THE NMC TO DO THEIR DIRTY WORK – AND PASS ON THE BILL TO NURSES

The NMC received 4,407 referrals in 2011/12, an increase of almost 50 per cent in the space of only two years. Yet two thirds are thrown out either immediately or following scrutiny by an NMC investigation committee. So the main reason that the UK’s nurses and midwives are being asked to pay an extra £44 a year for the privilege of working is to fund expert panels to determine that members of the profession have done nothing wrong. You couldn’t make it up.

There is nothing to stop members of the public accusing a nurse or midwife of being unfit to practise, and their complaints have to be given due consideration. But employers are the biggest single source of referrals, not patients and their relatives. The problem is that referring nurses and midwives who are guilty of minor misdemeanours to the NMC is an easy way out for managers. They do not have the hassle of overseeing disciplinary proceedings, and can leave the NMC to do their dirty work – and pass on the bill to professionals.

During 2011/12, only 365 cases resulted in striking off orders and 98 in cautions. Recent cases have involved a nurse accused of stealing a banana and another of taking two paracetamol from the drugs trolley. Grounds for some form of disciplinary action at local level, maybe, but not for the NMC to waste nurses’ and midwives’ registration fees on investigations.

Perhaps the NMC should have the power to make employers pay. It would require a change in the law, but managers might think twice about referring employees to their professional regulator if they had to pick up the tab should the case be thrown out at the first stage. Pressure must be maintained on the NMC and the government to rethink the proposed fee increase. Almost 2,500 Nursing Standard readers have already signed our petition against such a massive rise. Others can do so at www.nursing-standard.co.uk

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