Regional cartel’s assault on staff pay and conditions sparks outrage

By Tamsin Snow

Nurses’ and doctors’ unions have refused to negotiate with a pay cartel that has published a list detailing how millions can be shaved from wages by cutting sick pay and reducing increments.

The south west pay, terms and conditions consortium – comprising 20 NHS trusts employing 68,000 staff including 20,000 nurses – outlined 28 ‘options’ that would erode terms and conditions. It claims the measures could safeguard thousands of jobs.

The cost-cutting ideas are set out in two discussion documents and state that a typical trust employing 3,500 staff could save £420,000 by withholding 10 per cent of annual increments (see box for other savings).

Consortium steering group chair Chris Bown, who is chief executive at Poole Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, said the options were not yet proposals, but had been drawn up to generate valuable discussion.

He added that feedback on the documents will inform a series of recommendations to be presented to each consortium trust board by the end of the year.

‘Although national discussions on modifying Agenda for Change are taking place, we felt it was irresponsible to sit back and not do anything,’ said Mr Bown.

Opposing voices

A joint statement issued by unions including the RCN, Unison, Unite, the Royal College of Midwives and the British Medical Association, said the consortium has ‘no status or authority’ and that pay negotiations must be conducted at a national level.

Commenting on the consortium’s option to make nurses work an extra hour a week for free, RCN head of employment relations Josie Irwin said nurses already work one shift a week on average in unpaid overtime.

NHS Employers will meet with unions next month to discuss the results of a survey on its national proposals to remove unsocial hours rates from sick pay, establish a closer connection between increments and performance, and remove fast-track increments for newly qualified staff.

NHS Employers director of employment relations and reward Gill Bellard said local action such as that seen in the south west could be avoided if unions agree to its proposals.

Foundation Trust Network director of strategy Saffron Cordery warned that more trusts could introduce local pay unless national agreements were more flexible.

‘Outrage, disgust and distress’ at proposed 58 per cent NMC fee hike

Tens of thousands of nurses have overwhelmingly rejected Nursing and Midwifery Council proposals to increase fees from £76 to £120.

Responding to an RCN consultation on the fee increase, which closed last week, nurses said they were not prepared to pay more to practise.

The RCN received a record-breaking 85,720 responses, in which nurses vented their ‘outrage, disgust and distress’ at the 58 per cent increase.

The rise was proposed to help fund the soaring number of Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) referrals and cases. But 87.3 per cent of RCN members said it was unfair that nurses should foot the entire bill.

One college member commented: ‘The NMC should not ask to raise fees until it can show that the organisation is more efficient and effective, and proves that it provides an appropriate service for the fee we pay already.’

A total of 99.3 per cent of RCN members rejected the increase, as did 98 per cent of respondents to Unison’s consultation.

The NMC declined to comment before it had analysis of the responses.