RCN activists’ fury at proposals to dilute terms and conditions

By Jennifer Sprinks

The prospect of NHS nurses in England receiving a significant reduction in their terms and conditions moved a step closer last week after unions agreed draft proposals to overhaul Agenda for Change.

Health unions will decide shortly how to consult with members on the proposals, which include dropping unsocial hours pay during sickness absence and linking incremental rises to locally agreed performance standards.

Newly qualified nurses on band 5 will have a single incremental pay rise in their first year, instead of the current two, under proposals drawn up by unions and NHS Employers aimed at encouraging trusts to stick to Agenda for Change (AfC).

But delegates at the RCN UK stewards’ conference in Birmingham on Saturday reacted furiously to news that unions had agreed to the draft proposals in principle a day earlier.

Several said that any agreement to water down AfC would lead to further attacks on terms and conditions.

RCN north west region steward Joanne Heyworth said: ‘If we agree to one thing, employers are going to move to two, three or four things.’

Paediatric nurse Mike Travis, a member of RCN council, said: ‘If we give employers an inch, they will take a mile.’

Consultation

When asked by stewards what guarantees there were that NHS trusts would stick to any new agreement, RCN general secretary Peter Carter acknowledged that there were none.

He told the conference that the RCN will not be holding a ballot to consult members on the proposals, but that they will be seeking members’ views via the college’s boards and branch meetings.

He added: ‘Nothing has been decided yet and ultimately it is down to what members say. But if we reject the proposals, we have to be prepared for serious industrial action.’

Unite head of health Rachael Maskell told Nursing Standard that she had ‘serious concerns’ about the draft proposals, but would consult with her members.

Unison head of health and staff side chair Christina McAnea said that although the proposals will change elements of AfC, they include a new commitment from employers to use the pay and grading system. ‘We hope that this will enable trusts, including those in the south west considering regional pay, to commit to national pay.’

The union’s governing executive will decide next week whether to consult with members, and if so how.

Royal College of Midwives director of employment relations Jon Skewes said his union may hold a special meeting to discuss how to proceed.

Local pay could spark mass exodus

Nurses employed in the south west of England will leave their jobs in droves if a pay ‘cartel’ is allowed to drive down their pay and conditions of employment, an MP warned this week.

Ben Bradshaw told MPs during a parliamentary debate on proposals by 20 trusts to change nurses’ terms and conditions that he had been inundated with letters and emails about the plans.

‘In more than 17 years, I have never received so many emails and letters expressing such anger and dismay as I have on this issue,’ he said. Mr Bradshaw went on to quote from some of the correspondence from nurses, with one describing staff at ‘breaking point’.

He was challenged by Andrew George, Liberal Democrat MP for St Ives, Cornwall, who said that the previous Labour government had created foundation trusts (FTs) with the freedom to set pay, which had allowed the ‘cartel’ to become established.

But Mr Bradshaw said the legislation did not allow FTs to set their own salaries. He said: ‘The FT legislation in quite clear – FT hospitals must pay rates as good or higher than those under Agenda for Change.’

In a separate debate, Mr Bradshaw voted for a motion calling on the government to halt the work of the pay consortium. The motion, put forward by shadow health secretary Andy Burnham, failed by 292 votes to 226.

Meanwhile, directors of nursing at the 20 NHS trusts in south west England who have signed up to the pay ‘cartel’ declined to comment when asked by Nursing Standard whether they support moves to break away from national pay.

Our survey coincides with a report by the think-tank Reform backing regional pay. The authors claim that allowing employers to develop terms and conditions will drive up the quality of care. Go to www.reform.co.uk/resources/0000/0508/1.pdf