Hunt’s one-year work experience plan is ‘unworkable’, say academics

By Jennifer Sprinks

Plans to make all prospective nursing students work as healthcare assistants for up to a year have received a mixed reception from nursing leaders.

The RCN, nurse academics and students raised concerns at the cost and practicality of the idea, which would effectively extend nurse training from a minimum of three years to four.

But the government insisted the proposal, announced as part of its initial response to the Francis Report, could be introduced on a ‘cost neutral’ basis.

England’s chief nursing officer, Jane Cummings, told Nursing Standard: ‘Potential nurses and midwives can gain important insight into the role by experiencing the healthcare environment before embarking on a career in the profession.’

She will work with Health Education England, which oversees training nationally, on a pilot scheme.

In his report into care failings at Stafford Hospital, Robert Francis recommended that prospective nursing students should complete at least three months’ work experience in a care setting. Health secretary Jeremy Hunt has extended this period up to a year ‘to ensure the right people become nurses’.

He told a press briefing: ‘If someone is not prepared to roll up their sleeves and do the work for a year, that suggests they are not suitable to become a nurse.’

However, Council of Deans of Health chair Ieuan Ellis said the government’s plan seems ‘unworkable’ given the sheer number of prospective students who would need to be HCAs.

He said that staff are already struggling to mentor less experienced colleagues, students and HCAs.

UCAS figures show that 22,137 students won places on nursing degree programmes in 2012/13. Using this figure and assuming that all students would be paid on the bottom point of band 2 (£14,294) then more than £316 million would be required to pay them annually.

RCN head of policy Howard Catton said: ‘Where is the money going to come from? If it means creating additional HCA jobs, it could increase the workload of existing registered nurses. It may require an increase in the registered nursing workforce.’

The college’s student adviser Gill Robertson said that prospective nursing students already find it difficult to gain experience in care settings prior to studying.

‘Work experience is not accessible to all and four years in training is a long time, so this could act as a deterrent.’

NHS Employers chief executive Dean Royles said the government’s plans would need to be piloted carefully.

A Department of Health spokesperson was unable to confirm whether the move would involve additional HCA posts being created.

She added that would-be students would be paid, but said that the scheme would be ‘cost neutral’.

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