Leaders must act to prevent care apathy

Some myths become so well known that they mutate into received wisdom. An example is the view that the ills afflicting modern nursing can be attributed to the values shared by today’s recruits. This mistaken view has gained traction in part because so many senior and retired nurses insist that the training regime was better in their day. But that does not make it true.

RCN general secretary Peter Carter is in no doubt that the overwhelming majority of today’s students start their courses with the right values. He says so from a position of strength, because he visits universities and meets cohorts of new recruits. He is also aware that students and newly qualified nurses are more likely to blow the whistle on poor care than those who have witnessed it for years on end and have become blind to its existence.

Yet the government’s flagship policy in response to the Francis report is for would-be nurses to spend up to a year working as healthcare assistants. Setting aside the practical problems this policy presents – of which there are many – it would appear to be wholly unnecessary.

In an interview with Nursing Standard this week, Dr Carter points out that poor care is much more likely to be delivered by nurses who are worn down and worn out. Typically they have worked for many years with patients who rarely get better, such as older people or those with learning disabilities. There are plenty of nurses in such settings that maintain high standards, but some find it impossible and become unfit to practise as a result. This does not absolve individuals of responsibility for their actions, but it is incumbent on those in leadership positions to do something about it. Dr Carter’s remedy is for nurses who are stuck in a rut to be offered the chance to change jobs and be given a fresh start.

Several speakers at this year’s RCN congress pleaded that ‘something should be done’ about those nurses whose poor care gives the profession a bad name. Here is an example of what that something might be.

NURSES WHO ARE STUCK IN A RUT SHOULD BE OFFERED A NEW JOB AND A FRESH START

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