Senior nurses convince MPs to back campaign for safe staffing

By Jennifer Sprinks

Members of the Commons health committee were among MPs and peers who signed up to a campaign on safe staffing levels at a high-profile event held by senior nurses in the Houses of Parliament last week.

The Safe Staffing Alliance – a group of senior nurses brought together by Nursing Standard – encouraged MPs to back the campaign’s message that care is unsafe on wards when staffing levels fall below a ratio of one nurse to eight patients.

Andrew George, Liberal Democrat MP and health committee member, told attendees at the event: ‘An organisation can have the most sophisticated culture and leadership, but if they have not got enough nurses on the front line those count for nothing.’

Mr George said he is committed to putting nurse staffing levels higher up the committee’s agenda.

Pledging her support, health committee member and Labour MP Barbara Keeley said: ‘I would like to see safe staffing levels adopted at every hospital – they should start by displaying their staffing levels on boards in every ward.’

Among those who attended the event were Baroness Audrey Emerton, Mid Staffs nurse whistleblower Helene Donnelly, former health minister Paul Burstow, Lord Walton of Detchant, Burnley MP Gordon Birtwistle, West Lancashire MP Rosie Cooper, and Denton and Reddish MP Andrew Gwynne.

Patient representatives, nursing students and nurse leaders including Sally Brearley, chair of the prime minister’s forum on nursing and care quality, also attended.

In June, Baroness Emerton tabled an amendment on safe staffing levels to the care bill, emphasising the need for guidance on minimum numbers.

Evidence base

The 1:8 ratio is based on evidence published by King’s College London and the University of Southampton that found breaches of this standard occur in 43 per cent of medical and surgical wards in England.

Speaking on behalf of the alliance, Florence Nightingale Foundation chief executive Elizabeth Robb said: ‘They do not meet the fundamental standard of no more than eight patients to one nurse.’ The alliance will write to MP signatories asking them to find out about the methods their local hospitals use to ensure safe staffing.

Salford Royal NHS Foundation Trust began displaying its daily staffing levels in wards in May. Trust executive nursing director and alliance member Elaine Inglesby-Burke told Nursing Standard: ‘It shows staff and patients that managers are paying attention to staffing levels.’

NMC unable to test language skills of EU nurses

Nurses from the European Union applying to practise in the UK will not have their language skills tested by the Nursing and Midwifery Council, despite a new EU directive that gives the regulator the power to do so.

The directive, passed in the European Parliament last week, permits EU health regulators to check for language competence before allowing professionals migrating within the EU to practise.

But the NMC said that the Nursing and Midwifery Order 2001, which sets out the regulator’s powers, does not allow it to check language competence. The order would need to be revised before the directive could be adopted.

In the meantime, it is urging employers to check the language competence of EU applicants.