Shortfall in learning disability nurse numbers sparks fears for the future

By Jennifer Sprinks

Nineteen months after the UK’s chief nursing officers warned of a shortage of learning disability nurses, figures from the nursing regulator show the number registered has dropped by more than 700.

A UK-wide review of learning disability nursing, commissioned and led by Scotland’s chief nursing officer Ros Moore, warned that the number of new registrants to the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) has been declining over the past ten years.

In 2011, there were 21,123 learning disability nurses registered with the NMC, but this number has now fallen to 20,339.

Figures published by Health Education England last month show that an additional 25 learning disability nurse training places are being commissioned in 2014/15 compared with 2013/14.

Around 1.5 million people have learning disabilities in the UK, with numbers continuing to rise.

RCN learning disability nurse adviser Ann Norman told Nursing Standard: ‘I continue to be concerned about the insufficient numbers of learning disability nurses. Employers and commissioners lack an understanding of the role and often think the work can be done by another healthcare professional or general nurse.’

‘EMPLOYERS OFTEN THINK THE WORK CAN BE DONE BY A GENERAL NURSE’

The UK-wide review’s report, Strengthening the Commitment, called for systems to collect workforce data on current nursing levels to help predict future required numbers.

Each country has agreed to devise individual action plans for delivering on the 17 recommendations in the review, with progress at different stages.

Northern Ireland is the only country that has not yet implemented a plan. Its Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety is consulting on a plan for 2014/15, aimed at ensuring safe staffing levels, skill mix and pre-registration training commissioned places. It is expected to be implemented from March.

RCN Northern Ireland’s response to the consultation, which closes next week, expressed concerns about the ‘recent sharp decline’ in the number of learning disability nurses.

Northern Ireland’s Health and Social Care Clinical Education Centre assistant director Maurice Devine, who helped develop the action plan, said: ‘With the number of learning disability nurses expected to retire in the next few years, there is anxiety over whether we will have sufficient nurses for future posts.’

In Scotland, a new action plan for 2014/15 is expected in March and local implementation groups are being established across the 14 health boards.

The Department of Health plans to publish a progress report on its action plan, devised in 2012, later this month.

Nurses at Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust are visiting community centres and working men’s clubs to offer health checks to people aged 40-74 who rarely go to their GP.

The nurses measure factors including blood pressure, weight and cholesterol, and ask lifestyle-related questions.

Male-dominated workplaces are also being targeted because men have a low rate of attendance at checks.

Health checks co-ordinator Vicky Smith (pictured) said: ‘In future, we plan to look at more vulnerable groups such as people with mental health problems.’