Compassion benefits patients, but can be big emotional drain on staff

By Kat Keogh

Nursing students risk emotional exhaustion before they qualify because of pressure to be compassionate at all times, according to a new study.

A survey of 350 University of Bedfordshire nursing students suggested the emotional demands of the profession had already started to take a toll on some respondents’ wellbeing and work-life balance.

The survey presented students with a series of statements relating to their nursing placements, emotional wellbeing and work-life balance (see box) and asked them to comment.

Their responses showed that those required to display higher levels of compassion were more likely to feel drained because of the need to manage their feelings in front of patients.

University of Bedfordshire senior nursing lecturer Sandra Leggetter, who led the study with psychologist Gail Kinman, said it was worrying that students already showed signs of fatigue so early in their careers.

“We need to care for those nurses who care for their patients,” Ms Leggetter told Nursing Standard. ‘If we expect the workforce of the future to have longevity, we need them to be emotionally resilient.’

Compassion is one of the cornerstones – along with care, competence, communication, courage and commitment – of the 6Cs, a strategy for nursing values set out by England’s chief nurse Jane Cummings.

The findings of the 2011 survey, which was published last week, have prompted a curriculum change across all nursing and midwifery courses at the University of Bedfordshire.

Emotional intelligence is now a component of the curriculum for all year groups at the university, which includes workshops on coping mechanisms and being able to reflect on their training.

‘Pre-registration courses should not be all about the theory,’ Ms Leggetter added. ‘Students need to learn about the softer skills too.’

Professor Kinman said the survey results showed a need for support systems across the profession, not just aimed at nursing students.

‘Compassion has huge benefits for patients. It helps them through stressful situations and engages them so they are more likely to follow medical advice,’ she said.

‘However, we must make sure there is support for the staff providing that compassion so they do not feel emotionally depleted.’

Community help for people with hepatitis C

A nurse-led hepatitis C clinic is getting to work on boosting treatment rates and helping dispel the stigma surrounding the infection.

The community clinic opened its doors last week at the Unity Drug and Alcohol Recovery centre in Carlisle. It is being run by Cumberland Infirmary hepatology nurse Cherry Hughes.

Patients can be diagnosed and treated at the weekly clinic without the need for a hospital appointment.

It is estimated that 255,000 people in England have hepatitis C, with nearly nine out of ten cases caused by injecting illegal drugs.

Ms Hughes said some patients referred to hospital services by the Unity centre do not turn up because they worry about how they will be judged by hospital staff.

She said: ‘If we are to combat the tide of hepatitis C, we need to be out there working in a place like Unity, where patients feel comfortable and emotionally supported – not sitting in a room for an hour while someone does not attend.’