RISE IN STUDENT NUMBERS COULD FAIL TO PLUG THE RETIREMENT GAP

The number of students starting nursing degree programmes in Scotland is to increase by nearly 7 per this year.

A total of 2,698 nursing students will start training when the 2014/15 academic year begins in the autumn, up from 2,330 in 2013/14.

Adult nursing places will increase by 5 per cent from 1,727 to 1,813.

Nursing unions welcomed the trend, but the RCN warned the rise will not be enough to plug a predicted shortage as thousands of staff reach retirement age. One third of nursing staff in Scotland are now aged 50 or more.

RCN Scotland director Theresa Fyffe called for a focus on quality as well as numbers, and for the existing workforce to be primed for senior roles as more experienced staff retire.

Queen Margaret University Edinburgh workforce expert James Buchan said Scotland was reaching a ‘tipping point’ due to an ageing workforce.

‘It is not just a numbers game,’ he cautioned. ‘We need to ensure the appropriate skill mix is maintained as demand increases due to higher patient acuity in hospitals and clients with multiple chronic conditions.’

Midwifery student numbers in Scotland will increase from 140 to 160. Royal College of Midwives Scotland director Gillian Smith said the ageing midwifery workforce might present job opportunities for midwives who had previously had to travel to England to find work.

‘Some midwives are doing three long days in the south and then returning home,’ Ms Smith said. ‘This could be an opportunity for those who want to work closer to home.’

Health Education England revealed 13,276 nurses will begin training this autumn, up from 12,134 in 2013/14.

WORLD IN BRIEF

Support staff Nurses in Malawi handed president Joyce Banda a petition last week calling on her to enable healthcare support workers to become nurses.

The National Organisation of Nurses and Midwives presented the petition after a demonstration. It is pressing the president to introduce a directive helping nurse and midwife technicians to undertake a year-long diploma-level nursing programme. The union wants them to have greater opportunities to progress.

Avian flu death A nurse in her twenties has become the first person to die from avian flu in the Canadian province of Alberta. The unnamed woman, described by colleagues at Red Deer Regional Hospital as ‘the bright light in the room’, died two days after being admitted to hospital on January 1. The nurse had travelled to China last month to visit her mother. Alberta Health Services said hospital staff had worn protective gloves and clothing when treating her for the virus. The province’s chief medical officer James Talbot said: ‘We took extra precautions and no one is symptomatic. I am confident there will be no transmission in Alberta.’

Smoking rates down The proportion of nurses in the United States who smoke dropped by more than one third between 2003 and 2011, a study by the University of California found.

The study, published in this month’s Journal of the American Medical Association, found that the rate of smoking among nurses fell by 36 per cent, compared to a 15 per cent drop in the general population.

The American Nurses Association welcomed the findings, saying nurses are acting as role models. The association recently set up the Healthy Nurse programme, which encourages nurses to pay greater attention to their own health.

The proportion of acute hospitals in England, claimed Bracknell conservative MP and part-time GP Philip Lee. He said there were currently too many acute hospitals and trusts were struggling to adequately staff them.

‘Dr Lee told a Commons debate: ‘A reconfiguration of hospital services, with fewer acute sites, would allow proper staffing of acute medical wards.’

Whitehall has said it has no plans to make it a criminal offence to suspend nurses for raising clinical concerns.

‘Decisions regarding suspension are made by the employer,’ health minister Dan Poulter told the Commons. He added that it was ‘absolutely critical’ staff could speak up about patient safety.

NURSING STANDARD