Further freezes would make pay ‘unfair and uncompetitive’ say MPs

By Jennifer Sprinks

A group of influential MPs has warned the government against continuing to freeze nurses’ pay to address the financial challenges facing the NHS.

Commons health committee chair Stephen Dorrell said continued pay restraint would lead to nurse wages becoming ‘unfair and uncompetitive’. He added: ‘That is not a trend we can continue indefinitely.’

Mr Dorrell was commenting on the committee’s Public Expenditure on Health and Social Care report, published last week, in which it was revealed that at least £10.8 billion was saved from the NHS budget between 2011 and 2013. Around 25 per cent of the savings have come from NHS staff pay.

The report states that the NHS needs fundamental change if it is to improve patient care and make savings of 4 per cent a year. It adds that freezing nurses’ pay is not the answer to saving money, suggesting instead that a more affordable and integrated health and social care model should be found by encouraging closer co-operation between community nursing, pharmacy and GP services.

Mr Dorrell refused to be drawn on whether nurses’ pay should be frozen for the forthcoming year, but said: ‘You cannot deliver high quality care and be a good employer if pay becomes progressively inequitable as a whole.’

The 2013 RCN employment survey revealed that more than one third of 10,000 nurses had ‘very seriously’ considered leaving their job in the past year. In addition, a Nursing Standard survey conducted in November showed that some nurses are resorting to payday loans in the wake of the pay freeze.

RCN head of employment relations Josie Irwin said continued pay restraint could have a detrimental effect on future nurse staffing levels.

‘It is no coincidence that the number of agency and bank nurses is increasing at the moment,’ she told Nursing Standard. ‘There is a growing shortage of nurses, which is hidden by a reliance on agency staff.’

Framework reform

In November, health unions began arguing their case for a minimum 1 per cent pay rise from April. Together they urged the NHS Pay Review Body (RB) – the independent group that advises the government on nurse pay each year – to reject the Department of Health’s (DH) claim that a wage increase is unaffordable.

In written evidence to the RB, the DH argued it would freeze pay for a further year and use the savings to reform the pay framework.

The RB will make recommendations to the government this month and nurses are likely to find out in March whether their pay will increase in April.

To read the report, go to tinyurl.com/qaqt935

TEDDY BEARS’ QUICK KNIT

Health visitors from Northern Lincolnshire and Goole NHS Foundation Trust have taken up a new hobby – they are knitting toy bears for children involved in road accidents.

The health visiting team at West Street Children’s Centre in Scunthorpe began knitting in December after Lincolnshire Police appealed for the local community to knit 500 bears by September.

The bears are used to comfort the children and the team has already knitted 140 of them by enlisting support from colleagues, friends and family.

Specialist community practitioner in public health Phyllis Daly (pictured third from right) said: ‘It has been great fun and good for team building. It is good to know that the children will feel less frightened having the bears.’