Careers that end before they have properly begun

Numbers of newly registered nurses who leave the profession are rising, with some saying they’re seen as ‘snowflakes’ in uncaring workplaces – so what can be done?

Newly registered nurses are working in uncompassionate and uncaring environments, and feel silenced by colleagues who are ‘too busy’ to support them, a nursing charity says.

With an ongoing recruitment and retention crisis in the NHS, there are concerns that the UK is haemorrhaging valuable newly registered staff who should have the potential for long careers – but who are instead leaving due to poor experience in their first months or years.

Registration data published by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) show that the number of newly registered nurses (NRNs) leaving the register increased by 42% in the previous three years.

In March 2022-23, there were 1,165 registrants who left the register within three years of joining, compared with 820 in March 2019-20. The number who left within 12 months of registration jumped from 16 in 2019-20 to 88 in 2022-23.

The situation and its connection to lack of support and burnout was highlighted at last month’s RCN’s annual congress, where members voted to call on the council to declare a crisis in working conditions and quality of support available to nursing students and NRNs.

Unwelcoming workplace environments

At the start of the year, the RCN Foundation published the Follow Your Compassion project,
which exposed the real-life challenges and emotions new nurses navigate in their first months and years working in the health service.

The project was an attempt to understand how nurses who were educated and had qualified during the pandemic experienced being newly qualified.

The foundation’s head of grants and impact, Sarah McGloin says: ‘These nurses had their training curtailed and the transition from student to staff nurse was sped up and chaotic.

‘We felt we wanted to understand experiences of their first years.’

The project, a collaboration with The King’s Fund, contacted nurses and midwives from a wide range of settings in the NHS, social care and the independent sector. A final group of 22 registrants was asked to keep journals and record their reflections of what happened on their shifts. They also took part in four reflective group sessions.

‘We found that these nurses felt they didn’t have a voice,’ says Ms McGloin. ‘They were encountering environments that were uncompassionate and uncaring. Some didn’t feel safe to ask questions when they felt unsure, and some were even told “you should know that, you’re qualified now”.

‘There was a lot of being told “we are too busy” by colleagues. There was also a lot of fear around a rhetoric that has developed that if you make a mistake you will lose your PIN.

‘There were a few pockets of good practice and support that came through, but we also heard some harrowing stories.’

Managers’ attitudes to NRNs’ difficulties

As some newly registered staff struggle with the transition from student to registered nurse, difficulties or challenges are sometimes met with accusations of being the ‘snowflake generation’ and suggestions the workplace culture is ‘just the way it is’.

As part of the project, Ms McGloin and RCN Foundation director Deepa Korea carried out two online sessions with a group of ward managers, chief nurses and managers to ask for recollections of these nurses’ own experience as new registrants, and to feed back what they had learned from the project’s group of 22 current NRNs.

In the discussion, they found that the managers were dismissive of the NRNs’ experiences.

‘Nurses felt they didn’t have a voice, they were encountering uncompassionate and uncaring environments’

Sarah McGloin, head of grants and impact, RCN Foundation

‘The attitude was “that’s just how it is” or “it’s really busy”. The term “snowflake generation” was used. We were shocked,’ says Ms McGloin.

Ms Korea says they saw a disconnect between upper management and the experience of front-line staff.

‘What the strategic leaders will tell us is that they have fantastic preceptorship programmes at their organisations and a strategic plan for compassionate leadership,’ she says.

‘We saw some fantastic initiatives coming from the top, but they are not being fed down. There’s a disconnect between the levels.

‘You might have an award-winning programme, but if you go down to the medical wards and talk directly to the band 5 nurses about how the preceptorship programme is going, they’ll tell you that they don’t have enough staff or time.’

Ms McGloin says this reality is ‘understandable’ as staff are under a ‘huge amount of pressure’ with the current demands on the NHS.

She says that there is evidence that compassionate leadership – making your team feel valued, engaged and motivated – results in higher levels of well-being and productivity.
A break from nursing has helped me heal after an overwhelming first job

Alice (not her real name) qualified in November 2021 and secured a job on an acute medical unit (AMU) in the Midlands with a preceptorship.

But, despite this supportive network, Alice says she felt lonely and overwhelmed.

‘I felt like everyone else knew what they were doing and I felt so overwhelmed because I had some complex patients that were end of life/palliative on one of my first shifts,’ she says.

I dreaded going to work, so I left

‘Although people tell you they have time to help, realistically it’s every person for themselves. You focus on your own workload, even though it’s made out to be teamwork, which is sad actually.

‘I dreaded going to work. I left after two months. Maybe I didn’t give it long enough to settle but after one particular shift, I just crumbled – I had one patient shouting at me, who cornered me and spat at my feet. Then, at the same time I had one lovely family of a palliative patient crying and asking me whether their family member has died.

‘I’ve had patients masturbate at me, I’ve had patients self-harm, I’ve had patients disclose sexual assault in their lives and so I waited for hours for the police to arrive after a shift ended.

The bad was constantly outweighing the good

‘I could deal with the deaths and the sad parts of the job,’ she says. ‘It’s all part of the job, isn’t it? But I couldn’t deal with the ones that were alive.

‘They say the good outweighs the bad, but for me it was the opposite, the bad was constantly outweighing the good.’

Alice left her job at the unit and got a job in GP practice nursing. She later became pregnant and is now on maternity leave after the birth of her baby.

‘Having this break from nursing has helped me heal,’ she said. ‘I wouldn’t say I’d never go back, but I needed time away.

‘I would never return to hospital settings, nor would I put up with the horrible behaviour of patients and the public.’

The attitude of managers was “that’s just how it is” or “it’s really busy”.
The term “snowflake generation” was used.
We were shocked

Sarah McGloin, RCN Foundation

Middle East. I think a period of transition from graduate nurse to registered, say for six months where you are semi-qualified but don’t have full responsibility, would be really beneficial.

‘It would reduce anxiety and give newly registered nurses time to gain experience and confidence.’

Improving NRNs’ experience and so their retention

Ms Korea said she is confident that there is hope for the future, as the Follow Your Compassion project gains momentum and the RCN Foundation continues to shine a light on the issue.

‘Not hope in an esoteric kind of way,’ she says. ‘Hope in that we work for practical action that we can take forward, and that is what the foundation is working on at the moment.

‘There is an appetite for change. Improving experiences and retaining these nurses is vital for the future of nursing and for patients.’

Further information
Follow Your Compassion project
followyourcompassion.co.uk/nurses

I am newly registered and struggling – where can I go for support?

If you are facing challenges with your workload or mental health, talk to your preceptor, a manager or colleague, or a family member or friend. You can also contact the RCN’s Newly Registered Nurses (NRN) Network tinyurl.com/ron-nrn-network

The NHS has a 24/7 text service for staff. If you need someone to talk to, you can contact the confidential text support service by texting FRONTLINE to 85258