

Care warning as nursing staff hit 'breaking point'

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26 Sep 2011

SCOTLAND'S nurses are at breaking point because of unmanageable workloads, fears over job security and concerns about falling standards, the NHS has been warned.

A new study reveals morale among the country's NHS nurses has plummeted against a backdrop of continuing job cuts and a prolonged pay freeze.

The stark figures collated by the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) show fewer than one-third of NHS nurses in Scotland (30%) now feel secure in their jobs. Only two years ago, 82% felt they had a long-term future in their posts.

Only 38% of those surveyed this year said they would still recommend nursing as a career, compared to 54% in 2009, and almost two-thirds are more concerned about job cuts and the threat of redundancy than they were a year ago.

Almost three-quarters (74%) said they were experiencing stress and unmanageable workloads.

The findings come on the back of Scottish Government figures that show a rapid acceleration in the number of nursing posts being lost across NHS Scotland, with the number of nurses now at its lowest level since 2006.

The official Government figures published last month showed there was a loss of 485.7 full-time nursing and midwifery posts from March to June this year – around half of the projected total for the entire financial year.

Theresa Fyffe, director of RCN Scotland, said: "Given the continuing cuts to the nursing workforce, prolonged pay freeze and planned pension increases, it is no surprise the morale of nurses and healthcare support workers in our NHS is plummeting.

"While the impact of such pressures could be expected, it doesn't mean the situation should continue.

"If action is not taken and stress continues to increase, standards in patient care will begin to fall.

"The survey was carried out before it was confirmed in last week's Scottish Budget that pay for NHS staff earning over £21,000 is to be frozen for a second year, so it is likely the financial pressure on our members will increase even further."

Earlier this month NHS Lothian announced it is to shed almost 400 nursing posts by the end of the financial year, having already reduced total staff numbers by 734 in the past year, including 333 nurses. This year's reduction in staff amounts to a 4% cut in the workforce – the second-biggest cut anywhere in mainland Scotland.

Health Secretary Nicola Sturgeon said the Scottish Government was committed to a policy of no compulsory redundancies for a further year to maintain job security for NHS staff.

However, the RCN, which carried out the Employment and Morale Survey of 700 nurses, has warned standards in patient care will fall if current pressures continue.

Ms Fyffe said: "The survey's findings should fire a warning shot across the bows, for the Scottish Government and NHS managers alike.

"Our nursing workforce is at breaking point and the tactic of cutting posts in an unco-ordinated manner is simply not working.

"We need a vision for our NHS that sets out how services can be delivered more efficiently without placing an unacceptable burden on nursing staff, the very backbone of health services in Scotland."

Ms Sturgeon said: "The Scottish Government is doing – and will continue to do – everything in its power to support the NHS, and those who work in it, through difficult times.

"Over the next three years, health board

budgets will rise in real terms, reflecting our commitment to frontline services.

"Secondly, I have made it clear that, as the size and shape of the NHS workforce changes to reflect changing patterns of care, we must work in partnership with staff to ensure that quality of care remains the top priority. The RCN knows my door is always open to discuss these issues.

"Thirdly, we have made clear that a key objective of our pay policy is to preserve jobs as much as possible.

"We have now committed to maintaining our policy of no compulsory redundancies for a further year, precisely to give workers, like nurses, who do difficult and stressful jobs, the job security that they deserve."

It comes as the UK head of the RCN was forced to defend himself after he suggested relatives of the elderly should be encouraged to help care for their loved ones in hospital.

In comments published yesterday, Dr Peter Carter backed an end to restricted visiting times to allow relatives to help elderly patients with tasks such as feeding and going to the toilet.

He later said relatives should not be forced to carry out any tasks that plugged gaps in nursing care.

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