

CONSERVATIVE BUSINESS: NHS IN SCOTLAND 2016 02/11/16

The Royal College of Nursing

The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) is the world's largest professional organisation and trade union for nursing staff, with members in the NHS, independent and third sectors. RCN Scotland promotes patient and nursing interests by campaigning on issues that affect members, shaping national health policies, representing members on practice and employment issues and development opportunities. With around 40,000 members in Scotland, the RCN is the voice of nursing.

Background

There have been real improvements in the way health services are delivered in Scotland over the last 10 years (i.e. the patient safety programme, and better survival rates for some conditions such as heart disease and cancer). But the Audit Scotland report published last week clearly states that what Scotland needs is one coherent plan and associated, joined up actions. As the Auditor General says in the report, there is consensus across Scotland, and indeed internationally, that shifting care from hospitals to people's homes or to the community, is the right way to go, so the Scottish Government's aims – as set out in its 20:20 vision – are correct. Progress towards achieving the 20:20 vision, however, has been painfully slow and not always joined up. The Auditor General clearly sets out why Scotland needs a clear plan for change, if our health services are to be sustainable in the face of increasing demand. And patients, staff and families deserve a decisive response from the Scottish Government to answer the issues raised in the Report.

Targets

18 months ago, RCN Scotland jointly published a document with the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges and Faculties in Scotland [Building a more sustainable NHS in Scotland](#) in which we called for a new, more mature, approach to NHS targets. We followed this up, firstly, in our manifesto for the Scottish Parliament elections; and secondly, by publishing in June this year, a set of nine principles for measuring performance and success, which focuses on outcomes for people who need to use services and on sustainable improvement across health and wellbeing services. These principles were developed with our members, with partner

professions and with colleagues in the third, independent and social care sectors and discussed widely with politicians from all parties. As a member of the independent review on the approach to targets in Scotland's NHS, set up by the Scottish Government, RCN Scotland continues to press for a new approach to targets in our health and social care services. RCN Scotland very much welcomes the review and will seek to ensure it does not simply amend existing targets or create new ones. Rather, it should be based on the best possible outcomes for people and a human rights-based approach, focusing on the right to attain the highest standard of health and rights to full participation and inclusion in society.

Financial and service pressures

While it is positive that more people are living longer, older people do tend to need more care, particularly in the final year or years of their lives. Equally, Scotland has significant public health issues, such as obesity and alcohol misuse and continuing and seemingly intractable health inequalities experienced by many. There have also been advances, for example, in paediatric medicine, which mean that many children and young people with significant and complex health needs now live for far longer than ever before.

NHS funding is just not keeping pace with all these demands and the small uplift in the Scottish Government's health budget is a drop in the ocean in the face of these pressures on health board budgets.

Health care inflation also increases more than 'general' inflation, with the cost of new drugs, the increasing number of drugs being prescribed, new treatments and technological advances all contributing to rising pressures on budgets. So although the Scottish Government has sought to protect the health budget, the pressures on health boards continue to grow, year-on-year, as the money they are allocated just does not go as far as it used to, or needs to. At the same time, local councils' budgets have faced swingeing cuts of up to 25% which has had a significant knock-on effect on health budgets as a result of health and social care integration and the huge increases in demand for social care.

Some health boards are trying to make changes in the face of these increasing pressures, but often find themselves caught in the crossfire of political and public opinion.

Recruitment and retention pressures

The Audit Scotland report clearly recognises the link between staffing and the quality of care people receive. Nurse student intake numbers were cut by around a quarter between 2005/6 and 2012/13. RCN Scotland has consistently warned against such deep cuts – particularly in period 2011/12 and 2012/13 - and our health services are now reaping the consequences of decisions taken by the Government at that time. At the time of the cuts, nurse student intake numbers were also based only on NHS and did not take into account care homes. This has now changed, with Scottish Care and other organisations involved in the process for deciding future student numbers. There are also significant pressures on services across Scotland as a result of over 2,000 nursing vacancies, with almost 600 vacant for three months or more. And with the vacancy rate now standing at 4.2%, according to the latest Government figures published in September, the impact on nursing staff in post continues to grow. The latest Government figures also show that the cost of hiring agency nurses to cover nursing vacancies and shortages of nursing staff has soared by £7.5m in the last year - an increase of almost 47%. This is not sustainable and could create an environment where the delivery of safe, patient care is compromised and intolerable pressure is put on existing staff. These vacancies need to be converted into substantive posts to make sure patients continue to receive consistent, high-quality care from nurses who are familiar with their patients' health history and their needs. Additionally, Scotland's nursing workforce is ageing. The Audit Scotland report highlights pressures arising from the age profile of the nursing workforce in Scotland. In 2006, just over 40% (43%) of the nursing and midwifery workforce was aged 45 or over; in 2015, this had risen to well over half (54%). Many nurses will be retiring over the next ten years or so, particularly in community nursing: 46% of the district nursing workforce is 50 and over (December 2015, ISD NHS Scotland Workforce Statistics). It is also particularly difficult to recruit to some specialties, such as mental health, and the recruitment challenge in this sector is exacerbated by the fact that mental health nurses can retire at 55.

Although RCN Scotland was pleased that the Scottish Government honoured the recommendations of the NHS Pay Review Body, the 1% cap on pay increases over recent years has resulted in a real-terms fall in nursing pay of around 14% since 2010 – and has contributed to recruitment and retention problems.

Workforce Planning

RCN Scotland has been warning for some time about the workforce 'boom and bust' approach to workforce planning. The Scottish Government will be publishing a finalised National Workforce Plan in 2017. If Scotland is to have enough nurses and other staff in the future to meet all the increasing demands on our health and social care services and deliver safe, quality care for all patients, the National Workforce Plan should:

- take into account all the reforms which are currently underway across our health services
- consider the ever-increasing pressures to recruit nursing staff in more remote and rural areas; *and*
- consider the workforce needs in care homes and in the voluntary sector.

Clarity is needed from Government on how they will support health boards to deliver the changes needed and also how all the various health strategies and reforms currently underway will be delivered coherently across Scotland. Politicians need to set aside their differences and work together in order to get this right.

Conclusion

RCN Scotland agrees with the Auditor General that there is an urgent need for a different dialogue with the public and from politicians in the face of the challenges our health services are facing. Given the current pressures, Scotland's health and social care services are not sustainable in the way they're delivered now. In many areas, our health and social care services rely on the goodwill of staff to keep them going which impacts staff morale. Government needs to plan the future now with the public, patients and all health professionals in order to create sustainable services that deliver quality of care for patients.

Further information sources

If you would like any further information please contact Fiona Milne, Parliamentary and Media Officer, by email at Fiona.milne@rcn.org.uk or by telephone 0131 662 6192.