

Royal College of Nursing response to the United Nations (UN) High Level Commission on Non-Communicable Diseases (NCDs) draft report (May 2018)

The Royal College of Nursing supports the focus the World Health Organisation places on the prevention and management of non-communicable diseases (NCDs), and the goal set within the Sustainable Development Goals targets to reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases.

The RCN acknowledges the emphasis in the report on mental and physical health and well-being and on prevention as well as treatment, highlighting the need for health sector and wider public and private sector interventions to address such issues as food, tobacco, and alcohol consumption and environmental factors, such as air pollution.

Comments on the Draft Recommendations

- 1.1 The RCN reinforces the concerns of the European and international nursing and midwifery community about the lack of reference to or recommendations in relation to health workforce, who are instrumental in tackling NCDs¹. Nurses can be found in all health settings, not just within hospitals and health centres but as part of communities and providing outreach to vulnerable client groups. Nursing practice is grounded in the principles outlined in the draft report for addressing NCDs in taking a life course approach, founded on human rights and empowering and enabling communities. Nursing is integral to the delivery of key recommendations in the report as outlined below
- 1.2 **Recommendation 1** advocates prioritising interventions, particularly around primary care, based on sound data and practical feasibility. However, unless there are good outcome measures that are also not too complex to assess and contribute to, measuring the effectiveness of any interventions will be difficult. Sustaining and building on existing work is key and using the resources that are available effectively while building capacity with training and education of health workforce as well as communities.
- 1.3 In the UK, nurses with specialist advanced public health skills have an understanding of population needs and demographic data to inform services and strategy. At a local level nurses working in primary care - including practice nurses, school nurses or health visitors - are key to addressing weight management and obesity prevention, particularly in children by designing and delivering services. Health visitors promote and support breastfeeding, diet and nutrition, and weaning. School nurses can educate children and young people on healthy lifestyle choices. They also work with

¹ European Federation of Nurses Associations response to the UN High Level Commission on NCDs draft report May 2018, and International Council of Nurses, Nursing Now and International Confederation of Midwives joint statement <http://www.icn.ch/what-we-do/WHO-Independant-High-level-Commission-on-NCDs/>

schools to establish healthy eating/physical activity policies and practices and in supporting teachers to introduce additional physical activity at the start of the day. They play a role in reviewing types of food available on school premises and in establishing cooking clubs on Saturdays to educate children and their families about cooking, food and nutrition.

- 1.4 Because they work in every setting, nurses can also “make every contact count”² by integrating advice and support into other conversations with patients and in community settings. The nursing workforce as a whole needs the skills to support behaviour change, a key aspect of NCD prevention³.
- 1.5 **Recommendation 3** advocates for increased funding for health in national budgets, and within those for action to tackle NCDs. The RCN supports this recommendation and to achieve this within a UK context, the Government needs to reverse the decline in the number of nursing roles such as health visitors and school nurses, who are able to deliver practical interventions to prevent NCDs at an early age⁴.
- 1.6 There also needs to be equity in funding and service provision between mental and physical health within health budgets and it is important to recognise the link between mental health conditions and other chronic diseases. The physical needs of people with serious mental health illness (SMI), such as schizophrenia and bipolar disorder are all too often neglected. They are more likely to abuse alcohol, smoke heavily, have poor eating habits and be less physically active than the general population. This leaves them highly vulnerable to NCDs including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, chronic respiratory disease, and cancer.
- 1.7 Nurses can play a pivotal role in supporting those with complex mental health problems to address their physical health needs which is why the RCN has launched its parity of esteem programme⁵. The need to lobby governments, health strategists and policy makers to address these concerns has never been more imperative. So whilst it is commendable that mental health features in the draft report, these concerns worldwide must be a central part of the NCD strategy.
- 1.8 **Proposed new recommendation.** The World Health Organisation is a key partner in the Nursing Now campaign⁶ which seeks to ensure that nurses are central to designing and shaping policy based on their understanding of how to promote health and deliver care effectively we would want to see these objectives anchored in WHO’s own health strategies. As nursing and the wider health workforce are so central to the NCD agenda we would support the call from the European Federation of Nurses

² <https://www.rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/public-health/specialist-areas/the-role-of-nursing-staff-in-public-health>

³ See Royal College of Nursing resources <https://www.rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/supporting-behaviour-change>

⁴ Royal College of Nursing (2017) The Best Start – The Future of Children’s Health
<https://www.rcn.org.uk/professional-development/publications/pub-006200>

⁵ <https://www.rcn.org.uk/news-and-events/news/rcn-seeking-views-on-barriers-to-parity-of-esteem-in-mental-health>

⁶ Nursing Now <http://www.nursingnow.org/>

Associations for a specific Recommendation 5 to be added to the draft report:

- 1.9 **Recommendation 5:** *meaningfully engage the health workforce, and in particular nurses, in the design of health policies. Nurses represent the largest health care professionals' sector in close relation with patients. Therefore, nurses should be properly engaged in the design of health policies to guarantee fit-for-purpose solutions."*
- 1.10 Finally, we are disappointed that civil society organisations have been given less than a week to comment on the draft report on NCDs, on what is such a significant issue for the current and future health and well-being of people in high and middle income, and low-income countries. However, we would be happy to contribute further as a professional association and trade union to shaping more fully the recommendations, providing case studies and campaigning for effective implementation at country level.

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About the Royal College of Nursing

The RCN is the voice of nursing across the UK and the largest professional union of nursing staff in the world.

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