

Briefing for Lords debate on the implications of the European Union referendum result for government policies on ensuring safe staffing levels in the National Health Service and social care services

The EU nursing workforce in the UK

EU nurses make a vital contribution to the NHS and the health of the nation. There are currently 33,000 EU nurses registered to work in the UK and since 2010¹, there has been a 236% increase in EU nurses in the country.

The numbers show that the UK has an ever increasing reliance on nurses from the EU, who

will result in an increase in the number of nurse, midwife and allied health professional students in training. In addition, a coalition of over 20 healthcare trade unions, charities and professional colleges, led by the RCN, called on the Government to halt its plans⁴.

The RCN is warning the plans are high risk, that they may have serious unintended consequences and must be suspended until a suitable model of funding can be found. It is essential that the nursing profession is involved in developing, piloting and evaluating any changes to the way nurse education is funded.

Moreover, at a time when the need to develop the nursing workforce to be able to care for patients with complex needs, funding for supporting nurses to develop their knowledge and skills is essential. This must include enabling nurses to move across fields of practice and care settings as well as access specific post registration programmes to develop specialist and advanced practice. Examples of funding for tuition that could be lost include district nursing and mentorship training. District nursing teams, through their vital work in the community, have a crucial role in reducing hospital admissions and supporting early discharge. Despite this critical role we know that the numbers of district nurses has fallen dramatically over the last 10 years and the loss of funding for post-registration tuition would only exacerbate the current difficulties. This will lead to a further drop in numbers and further reduce the provision of essential community based nursing care.

New nursing roles

The Government has identified an opportunity to increase the skills of Health Care Support Workers through a new Nursing \$ V V R F L O D E, which has potential to improve career pathways and skills for these important staff. While this provides an opportunity to expand the Health Care Support Worker workforce, the role must not be used to substitute the clinical decision making skills of registered nurses. Having the right numbers of nurses with the right mix of clinical skills, is essential for good patient care.

Ensuring nursing representation within the Department of Health

Nursing has an important part to play in finding solutions to the issues facing the health service following the EU referendum result. However, recent structural changes within the Department of Health mean there will no longer be senior nursing representation at the heart of Government, therefore, losing the voice for the largest workforce in the NHS.

Questions must be asked about the future of the EU Professional Working Directive, which enables the free movement of professionals within the EU, including nurses, doctors and midwives. What will become of this directive? The lack of a nursing voice within the Department raises serious concerns about the ability to influence such issues in the best interests of safe and patients alike.

In addition, the lack of an independent nursing voice blocks opportunities to model new initiatives and test policies before they are implemented. Nursing leadership will be crucially important for steering through any policy changes affecting the NHS.

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