

Press Release

District nurse is becoming an endangered species, says Queen's Nursing Institute



The Queen's
Nursing Institute

26 March 2010

The latest NHS workforce census shows that the number of qualified district nurses working in community services in England has fallen below 10,000 for the first time.

The census is taken in September each year, and the results for 2009 were published on 25 March 2010 by the NHS Information Centre. It shows the number (headcount and whole time equivalent) of nurses, midwives and health visitors working in different areas of practice, and the year-on-year trends.

'This decline in the number of district nurses is not unexpected', says QNI Director Rosemary Cook. 'The headcount numbers have been going down every year since 2000, and the wte (whole time equivalent) figures has been declining for longer than that. But it is really worrying that there is no slowing in this trend, given that everyone agrees that more care, and more complex care, will be taking place in the community.'

Even adding in the number of community matrons (1,163) to the district nurse figure only brings the total to 11,593 – fewer than the district nurse figure of five years ago.

The QNI's Position Statement, published on 8 March 2010, highlights the Institute's concern that demand for care at home is rising dramatically, due to the ageing population and more people with long term conditions, as well as improvements in healthcare technology, at the same time as the supply of nurses specifically skilled to work in the home is falling. Their numbers are further threatened by the age profile of district nursing, with more than 1/3 of the workforce able to retire in the next 5 years.

'The number of other registered nurses working in community services has increased again,' Ms Cook notes. 'It has gone up by 38% over the last decade, and in whole time equivalent terms, it has risen by more than 46%. This is good news – we really need to build up the workforce outside of hospitals if we are going to have comprehensive services to meet the growing level of need. But it is essential that there are enough team leaders with specific expertise in nursing in the home to ensure that services are safe, and patients are properly assessed and supported. Not to do so is a false economy, and a risk to patients.'

The QNI's Position Statement sets out a number of actions the Institute will be pursuing to try to reverse this trend by working with commissioners, provider organisations, educationalists and regulators, as well patient organisations.

The recent Report of the Prime Minister's Commission on nursing highlighted the need for the 'lynchpin' community team leader role to be strengthened to provide 'visible, authoritative leadership and reassurance for services users and staff'. The QNI's 2020 Vision report, published last year, called for the role of the district nurse to be reinstated, in the face of growing demands for high quality and complex community care.

'It appears that the district nurse is becoming an endangered species' added Ms Cook. 'We must not let that happen, for the sake of the millions of people who receive home-based care every year. We must grow and develop a new generation of experts with the unique skills to nurse people at home, to lead our community teams.'

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Notes to Editors

The QNI's Position Statement can be downloaded from it's website at www.qni.org.uk

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