“School nurses need the tools to meet government vision”

Despite school nurses’ remarkable contribution to the health of young people, we are facing a shortage of these vital practitioners – and increasing demands for their services. The Royal College of Nursing has reported that 66% of school nurses feel overstretched and unable to carry out their role properly, 30% have reported recruitment freezes where they work and 20% have reported that staffing levels had been reduced because posts had been cut.

School nurses are crucial in identifying the needs of children and young people. The Department of Health (2012) recently published its service vision and model for school nursing in which it stated: “School nursing services can make a real difference to setting down strong foundations for good life chances and support children and young people in the choices they make about their health.”

As a school nurse, I couldn’t agree more. I am delighted that the government has recognised the contribution school nurses can make to the wellbeing of the next generation. They play a pivotal role in facilitating behavioural change and in promoting good health, particularly in areas such as obesity, smoking, and sexual and mental health. These experts also have a role in providing care for children with complex health needs.

The government’s vision suggests that school nurses should be part of multi-agency teams, providing services for those with a range of needs including disadvantaged children and young families, as well as those with disabilities, or mental health or substance misuse problems.

While school nurses are well placed to do this work, against a backdrop of post cuts and an already overstretched workforce, I cannot see how we can take this on with the present number of practitioners.

If school nurses are going to step up and provide an even more efficient service for all young people, we need investment and more training places, as well as technology and research studies to demonstrate value and outcomes of our specialism.

Young people want school nurses to be more visible and accessible, and to be able to see us more regularly at school. Importantly, they also want to be able to contact us by email, text and through online video chats, such as through Skype. The system needs to catch up with the way in which young people want to speak to us, as it’s still rare for a school nurse to be given a mobile phone as part of the job.

Our young people deserve an excellent service. However, this can only happen if we, the nurses on the ground, are given the right tools to do the job. The country needs more of us, we need the technology to interact with patients and we need people to understand the importance of the work we do. Only with these things in place will we be able to deliver the government’s vision for school nursing.

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Reference
Department of Health (2012) Getting it Right for Children, Young People and Families. tinyurl.com/DH-school-family

HIGHLIGHTS
COPD action plans to promote self-management p16
Developing a patient information leaflet p12
How to diagnose allergic rhinitis p20

SPOTLIGHT
Carer diaries give a voice to dying patients

Using diaries to record relatives’ and carers’ observations on the comfort and care of dying patients improves communication between staff and carers.

At one trust, carers and relatives record whether they feel patients are free from symptoms such as pain and nausea, and also record on a five-point scale how well they think care is being delivered (see page 24). A comments box allows feedback; relatives may suggest improvements or express thanks.

Relatives and carers did not find recording their views and thoughts onerous or distressing, and there is some indication that it may be helpful in the bereavement process.

These diaries can help loved ones become the patient’s voice at a time when it is likely that they will be unable to speak for themselves.

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