Do we have enough nurses to move care ‘closer to home’?

Unless you’ve been living in a non-WiFi-enabled cave recently (some of us did take rather extreme measures to avoid the World Cup), you might have noticed that the government is intent on moving many aspects of health care into the community, despite a surge of publicity warning this might not be the greatest idea in the world (‘Out-of-hospital plan “a recipe for disaster”, MPs warn’, www.bbc.co.uk).

Presumably though, with all this care now being re-routed into people’s homes, the numbers of community nurses must be rising significantly to take up the slack? Well, according to one recent survey from the Queen’s Nursing Institute (QNI), the answer seems to be a resounding, ‘Not so much...’. The QNI survey into the state of district nursing (2020 Vision — Five Years On: Reassessing the Future of District Nursing, www.qni.org.uk) canvassed 1,035 district nurses and found that 60% believed their teams had insufficient staff to meet the needs of patients; 83% said that communication with hospital discharge services was unsatisfactory and in some cases ‘very poor’; and that district nurses are being expected to deliver more complex care to larger patient numbers with no increase in staffing levels.

And you don’t have to take the QNI’s word for it. According to the Health and Social Care Information Centre — a non-departmental public body of the Department of Health set up to collect and analyse health data — district nursing numbers have fallen...
The QNI report isn’t all about the numbers either. As well as declining nursing posts, the report also highlights confusion around job titles, service planning and the use of technology, as well as communication with other agencies, such as social services.

All in all it sounds like what is traditionally known as ‘a right pickle’ and by any standards a cull like the one taking place in the community surely puts district nursing on the endangered species list. It also makes the government policy to move more care into the community seem a rather bizarre contradiction — on one hand increasing the amount of care taking place outside of hospitals, while reducing the numbers of nurses available to carry it out.

It’s not all the government’s fault, of course. We’ve been hearing for some time that there is a retirement ‘timebomb’ ticking away in district nursing (‘District nurses could be a thing of the past in 10 years without urgent action, warns Royal College of Nurses’, www.independent.co.uk), with the workforce growing older and newly-qualified nurses preferring the one hand increasing the amount of care taking place outside of hospitals, while reducing the numbers of nurses available to carry it out.

But, such a stark reduction in district nursing numbers over a relatively short period of time does feel like a disaster waiting to happen, and while no-one could point the finger at a particular government or deliberate policy, it certainly feels like eyes have been taken off balls somewhere along the line.

Perhaps, though, we’re in danger of making a mountain out of a molehill, after all the QNI report also contains many positives, including the strength of district nurses’ identity and professionalism, and the high regard they are held in by patients. A new QNI study into district nurse education has also found that the number of entrants to district nursing courses is rising (see ‘District nurse student numbers on the up’, pp. 14).

As ever it’s easy to highlight the problems, but what can be done? The QNI makes a series of recommendations, including:

- Policy leaders with responsibility for long-term conditions, nurse education and workforce planning to work with the QNI and other stakeholders to reverse the decline in district nurses
- Guidance set out in the joint QNI and Department of Health document, Care in Local Communities: A new vision and model for district nursing needs to be urgently implemented
- Any discussion about district nurse numbers and training to start with the needs of patients
- Measures are taken to raise the profile of district nursing as a rewarding career choice.

Whatever the answers, one thing is certain — community nurses will soon be looking after more patients than ever before. It would be nice to know that there will be enough of you to go around ...

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‘Lack of community nurses is policy madness’ — ‘More community care – fewer community nurses,’ writes Kathryn Godfrey in the Nursing Times, adding that, ‘action needs to be taken urgently to address what any thinking person can see is madness’.

‘District nurses could be a thing of the past in 10 years without urgent action, warns Royal College of Nurses’ — The Independent writes that, ‘there could be no more district nurses in England within a decade’, commenting on a RCN warning over the future of the profession.

‘Out-of-hospital plan “a recipe for disaster”: MPs warn’ — The BBC writes, ‘The NHS has tried to ensure more care is done in the community, but the MPs questioned the wisdom of this strategy.’
As the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence [NICE] announce guidelines for safe staffing levels in hospitals, it seems evident that similar discussions need to be had about staffing in the community — and soon! As patients are discharged earlier and earlier, so their care needs increase. This means that community nursing teams have to constantly respond to new challenges by developing new knowledge and skills and by being creative about how they deliver care. Effective leadership by competent and confident district nurses is essential to ensure that community teams provide a high-quality service, able to meet the needs of a complex and growing population.

As the current population of district nurses is growing older, there is certainly a need to attract more people into community roles, which will itself be a challenge as nursing numbers are very low across the board and recruitment and retention in the acute sector is also an increasing problem. Nursing has been under great scrutiny in recent years and the public have been made aware of some serious shortcomings. But perhaps now is the time for us all to become more vocal about the good work that we see many nurses doing on a daily basis and help to make it the attractive and rewarding profession that I once entered.

Kate Sanders
Practice development facilitator, Foundation of Nursing Studies

Much of what has been reported in the media has provided a negative image of the future of district nursing, but it certainly is not all ‘doom and gloom’. Indeed, there are many exciting opportunities for us to advance the role of district nursing as well as meeting the changing political agenda.

District nurses need to openly demonstrate their clinical leadership and stop measuring their workload in terms of ‘tasks’, instead highlighting the holistic complexity of the care required in people’s homes, which involves high levels of judgement and decision making.

It is true that there has been a decline in the numbers accessing district nursing programmes. However, the Association of District Nurse Educators points to recent increases, with some higher education institutions having reinstated programmes that were previously stopped. Future education needs to reflect the advancing role of the district nurse and move beyond the NMC standards for specialist education and practice, which have not been updated since 2001.

Heather Bain
Senior lecturer postgraduate and CPD education, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen

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Check out these documents for more information on community care strategies and policy:

2020 Vision Five Years On: reassessing the future of district nursing — The QNI’s recent survey of district nursing is based on the responses of 1,035 nurses. The document summarises the challenges facing district nurses today, and makes a number of key recommendations to help improve the situation (www.qni.org.uk/campaigns/district_nurse_survey).

Transforming the Delivery of Health and Social Care — this King’s Fund paper explores how the current health and social care delivery system has failed to keep pace with the population’s needs. It argues that incremental changes to existing models of care will not be sufficient and that a much bolder approach is needed (www.kingsfund.org.uk/time-to-think-differently/publication/transforming-delivery-health-and-social-care).

Care in Local Communities: a new vision and model for district nursing — this joint government and QNI document describes how more people are living into older age with chronic illness and comorbidities and need services that support them to remain ‘as well as possible for as long as possible’ within their own homes. The overall ambition is to increase the healthy years of life and reduce the social isolation that many older people experience (www.gov.uk).