Should we stay or should we go ... what would Brexit mean for nurses?

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The referendum to decide whether the UK should leave or remain in the European Union is being held on Thursday 23 June, 2016 and we all have a vote. But what does this mean for the NHS and, most importantly, what effect will this have on nurses and the current recruitment crisis?

I am no politician, but I am a nurse and as we all know there is a growing crisis in nursing recruitment as well as the NHS’s ability to deliver the government’s workforce plan. There just aren’t enough nurses to meet the growing demand for services. In recent weeks the NHS has taken yet another battering in the media — not just with the publicity surrounding the junior doctors’ industrial action, but also with the health service’s poor performance in hitting its national targets. Headlines such as ‘NHS fails to meet performance targets’, and ‘Unprecedented rise in A&E attendance’, paint a very negative picture of the organisation that many of us are employed by.

NUMBERS GAME

Nurses are under significant pressure to deliver better results with fewer staff and resources than ever before. Earlier this year the BBC reported that there were more than 23,000 nursing vacancies in the NHS in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (‘Thousands of NHS nursing and doctor posts lie vacant’ — www.bbc.co.uk). In an attempt to plug this gap, more than two-thirds of UK trusts are actively recruiting from the EU.

The NHS currently employs around 18,000 nurses and midwives from the EU. If we vote to leave, will our NHS workforce challenges grow or improve? Would working in the UK still be an attractive offer for those nurses wanting to work here?

What do our leaders say? The Royal College of Nursing (RCN) has taken a neutral stance, while the Royal College of Midwifery and Unison are both in favour of remaining in the EU. Leading up to the referendum, the RCN are hosting a live debate to give members the opportunity to learn about the impact remaining in or leaving the EU would have on nursing and health care generally. This debate will be streamed live on the RCN website at 5.00pm on Thursday 2 June, 2016.

LOOKING FOR ANSWERS

To be honest, I don’t know whether it would be better for nurses to vote for Bremain or Brexit, but I do feel that it is vitally important for us to seek as much information as we can to try and work out what might happen to our profession and our beloved NHS in either case. Crucially, will a decision to leave have a negative impact on the numbers of well-trained nurses who have come from the EU, or will we find instead that the numbers of homegrown nursing students grows to fill the gap?

As 23 June approaches, it is essential we try to understand the likely effect on nursing, the NHS and other healthcare providers of a vote to remain in or leave the EU. I urge you all to ask questions, do your research, and make sure you understand the potential impact of your decision.

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Flying the flag: the EU referendum could have major repercussions for nurse recruitment into the UK.
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