



# School Nursing: overstretched, under resourced

The role of the school nurse is integral to the health and wellbeing of children, and with the increasing prevalence of public health issues such as obesity, smoking and sexual health school nurses are more important today than ever before. Yet in the past two decades the number of school nurses has been in steady decline.

In 2004, the Government's Public Health White Paper included a commitment to 'at least one full time, year round, qualified school nurse working with each cluster or group of primary schools and the related secondary school'. However if the Government is to deliver on this commitment the RCN believes the number of school nurses must be doubled.

## The role of the school nurse

School nursing is a universally accessible service, acceptable to all backgrounds and communities which has proven key to the delivery of the Government's public health agenda.

The role of the school nurse has changed dramatically in recent years with nurses providing confidential advice and guidance on a range of issues including nutrition, exercise, smoking, mental health, drug abuse and sexual health. In addition the school nurse provides health promotion and education, enabling and empowering young people to make healthy life choices which affect them throughout their lives.

School nurses have a particularly important contribution to make to the development and implementation of school policies, influencing the adoption of inclusive child focused practices for children with particular needs such as those with disability, those in poverty and looked after children.

## Numbers

In contrast with the Government's target of one school nurse for every seven/eight schools, there are currently 2,140 whole time equivalent school nurses employed to work in state schools in the UK. This equates to a ratio of one full time, year round school nurse for every fourteen schools. These shortages are reflected on the ground with seventy one per cent of school nurses who feel that there are insufficient numbers in their area. Worryingly the RCN also found that over half of school nurses feel their workload is too heavy, and nearly ninety per cent of school nurses believe they are too busy or there is not enough time to provide the service required. Such shortages also present a challenge to the service in relation to backfill posts for those who are ill, on

The following organisations support the RCN campaign on school nursing:



Council for Disabled Children



Registered charity number 216401



annual leave, or participating in continuing professional development.

School nursing reflects the profile of nursing more generally with one in five school nurses reaching retirement age, leaving the future of the service under threat. However the demand for school nursing services is only set to increase. Nurses working in school settings are central to the delivery of the National Service Framework for Children, the Public Health White Paper and the Green Paper on youth. In future they will be a key component of the Government's vision for extended schools- which although an attractive concept, raises huge questions of capacity in the workforce.

With this in mind the RCN is calling on the Government to recognise the extensive pressure on school nursing and take steps to double the numbers of school nurses.

## Funding

As part of the Public Health White Paper, in England the Government allocated an extra £1 billion to deliver on commitments such as health trainers, sexual health services and school nursing. However the RCN has concerns that this funding is not reaching services on the ground. In order to ensure that school nursing can fulfil the important role envisaged for it by the Government, the RCN is calling for measures to be put in place to ensure these resources reach the frontline.

The recent announcement about Primary Care Trusts and Strategic Health Authorities in England has raised concerns regarding who will provide primary care services in the future-including school nursing. The RCN is calling on the Government to ensure that school nurses and other healthcare workers play a central role in decisions about the future of these services.

## Access to training

The Government's commitment to ensuring that all children have access to a "full time, year

round qualified school nurse" is understood by the RCN to mean a registered nurse who has completed a specialist practitioner qualification in school nursing. Currently the RCN estimates this applies to thirty seven per cent of school nurses.

Seventy one per cent of nurses working in schools have outlined their desire to undertake further training or education. However the difficulties in achieving this should not be underestimated, as more than three quarters of school nurses have experienced barriers to accessing training such as funding problems and access to study time. The RCN is also aware of some academic institutions in the UK ending their specialist practitioner courses, thereby making it difficult for existing school nurses and for potential new entrants to the profession to access training.

Access to training is fundamental to both the recruitment of new staff and the retention of existing staff. Therefore the RCN is calling on Government to improve access to training in order to prevent further exacerbating shortages in the service.

## Conclusion

The impact of school nurses on health outcomes cannot be taken for granted. Indeed, school nurses themselves have witnessed reductions in teenage pregnancies, a decrease in sexually transmitted infections and report that pupils are better able to make healthier choices. If their work is to continue and as predicted, increase then action must be taken to guarantee the future of the service.

## Further information

The figures quoted in this paper are taken from the results of a census survey of RCN school nurses in 2005 carried out on by Employment Research Ltd. For more information please contact RCN Parliamentary Officer, Emma McKinney on 0207 647 3840.