

Health Visiting Services & Public Health Nursing - summary of responses to discussion paper

The RCN had previously published two UK position papers: Pillars of the Community on developing the registered workforce in the community and a principles position paper on health visiting. Members had raised further questions about the invaluable contribution others had in meeting the public health agenda which required further consideration. The discussion paper 'Health visiting services and public health nursing' developed by members for members therefore intended to stimulate thinking beyond the role of health visitors and signal the need for all nurses to adopt a new approach to maintaining the concept of building community capacity which ultimately achieves the aims of good public health.

Responses to the discussion paper were received from across the UK. While member views varied there was considerable consistency in key areas. There was overwhelming support for the role of the health visitor in relation to young children and their families, with many advising that the concept of health visitors providing a 'cradle to grave' was somewhat fifteen or more years out of date. The majority of respondents clearly advocated that health visitors should concentrate on leading and delivering the healthy child programme or equivalents in each of the four countries of the UK, with contact pre-birth and intensive support for vulnerable families in the early years of a child's life. Many respondents however reported concerns about workload and complexities of caseload. Some respondents felt that the health visitor may not always be the best person to lead the management of some children's/families care advocating that health visitors needed to recognise the limitations of health visiting service provision especially where there are serious safeguarding issues or mental health issues.

There were mixed views about the need for a new/additional public health nurse role to cover the adult age population, although there was clear recognition of the needs of vulnerable older people. Many members reported that there were specific roles already in place such as occupational health nurses for those in employment and others highlighted the crucially important role of practice nurses or specialist district nurses in many areas in respect of the health of older people. There was generally a recognition that to meet the needs of the whole population would encompass a range of nursing roles as well as skill-mix within the team, including support staff.

It is clear from the responses received that there is a lack of recognition, prominence and awareness of the public health nursing roles already in existence for adults and older people, as well as inconsistency in the level of provision and access across the country. Some members in their responses highlighted particular gaps for the most vulnerable and hard to reach groups, as well as the need for such post holders to work collaboratively with health visiting and school nursing services to meet the public health needs of the population.

All respondents felt that public health ought to be part of every nurses business, while not detracting from the need to also having in place specialists in public health roles. Most respondents referred to the new NMC pre-registration nurse education standards reporting upon the greater emphasis on public health for all future undergraduate nursing education programmes. There was however also the recognition that culture change was required within services and a move in the focus of provision.

The findings will be considered by the RCN Public Health Forum at their strategic planning meeting in March 2012