



The voice of nursing in the UK

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Carol Hall
Chair of the Education Forum

Dear Carol,

Allow me to express my genuine thanks for the letter you sent me on 27th September.

The points you raised in the letter are, characteristically, well reasoned, logical and balanced. I feel that at this stage I should point out that much of the media attention that my comments received was not only inaccurate but unhelpful. Take for example the headline on the front page of the Times article, on which your letter is based, it read 'New nurses lack caring skills, says RCN chief' and was followed by more unhelpful coverage in this week's Nursing Standard. This is of course, not what I said in the slightest and is a frustrating misrepresentation of the important issues I was trying to raise.

As you rightly point out, I raised two quite distinct issues: nurse education and the regulation of healthcare assistants.

On nurse education, the point I sought to make was that the vast majority of newly qualified nurses start work as very competent members of the nursing team. It is however, the minority that don't reach this level that as the head of the RCN, I must concern myself with. In this job I have the good fortune to visit hospitals on an almost weekly basis and always make a point of speaking to the nursing staff I meet.

I recently spoke to a ward sister who told me that she had real concerns that on her ward, there were twelve students on placement. Quite obviously none of them get the full experience that they deserve. On paper, the students have fulfilled a placement in an acute setting; in reality however, the degree of experience they individually received was lacking. The RCN is fully supportive of the move towards an all-graduate profession but if the system is to work properly, then the quality of a student's placement must be consistent across the board.

Let me say again that the vast majority of students get the training they require, but any system in which a minority do not, must be looked at.

The second point I raised focused on the role of the healthcare assistant (HCAs). I said in the interview with the Times, and in many subsequent interviews, that HCAs are hugely valuable member of the nursing team who

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deserve the regulation afforded to their registered colleagues. As you rightly point out, there are 300,000 HCAs currently working in the United Kingdom and not a single one of them is on a formal register. HCAs provide important, essential and intimate levels of care to patients and it is thoroughly unacceptable that there is no system to regulate their practice. A second and quite separate point is that HCAs are being given more and more complex tasks to undertake, as pressures increase on registered nurses. Whilst it is acceptable that HCAs are undertaking these tasks, provided they have the necessary training, it does add further weight to the argument that these members of staff do need to be properly regulated, to protect themselves as well as their patients.

I hope this letter goes some way to explain what it was I was attempting to highlight and that whilst we do believe there are issues to deal with, the RCN has great faith in the nursing education system.

Yours sincerely,



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