

Nurses ‘are losing their sense of compassion’

Nurses in the NHS too often lack ability, compassion or even the simple desire to work in the profession, a report warns.

The report adds to growing concerns that nurses’ training has become too academic Photo: Getty Images

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In some cases staff lack basic skills, have a poor grasp of maths and do not understand the values of the health service, according to the NHS Future Forum.

The independent advisory panel, set up by the Government last year to examine the NHS, says there is “almost universal concern” about the “huge variations in quality” of education and training for nurses and midwives across the country.

NHS hospital managers are failing to take responsibility for the poor quality of some nurses, it says. It also accuses nurse training schools of failing to recruit the right type of student to ensure patients receive a good standard of care.

The report adds to growing concerns that nurses’ training has become too academic to prepare students properly for the realities of the job and makes them less willing to carry out practical care.

Prof Steve Field, a GP and chairman of the forum, said that nurses needed to be “more than a set of GCSE and A-level results”. Patients’ groups who had argued that nurses’ training had become too academic welcomed the report.

It comes days after the Prime Minister said it was time to “speak up” about problems with nursing, and chided politicians for having “hidden away concerns” about the profession in the past.

There have been a series of warnings from NHS watchdogs that patients — in particular the elderly — are suffering from poor standards of nursing care as they are ignored or mistreated on wards.

The Future Forum identifies the recruitment of student nurses as a key problem. “Selection in nursing was a particular issue, with a sense that the focus has moved away from selecting students on their ability, capacity for compassion and caring and desire to work in nursing,” the report says.

“This has led, in some cases, to significant dropout rates and issues with basic skills such as numeracy.”

Newly qualified nurses are sometimes not offered “any further training or induction”, meaning they fail to understand the values of the NHS or “have the right basic skills”.

Warning that hospital managers must get a grip on the situation, the report concludes: “There was support [from members] for a more rigorous selection process for nursing school places and a

strong belief that employers need to take responsibility for the quality of those trained in their locality.”

From next year, anyone wishing to become a nurse will have to study for a full degree in the subject under new standards introduced by the Nursing and Midwifery Council. While the main nursing bodies support the change, patients’ groups are worried it will lead to less caring nurses.

Prof Field said: “Sometimes students are being assessed purely on an academic basis rather than also on their social skills and how they relate to people. There’s no doubt that to be a nurse in the modern world you need to be at a certain intellectual level, but that should not be at the cost of being able to treat patients with dignity.

“After all, the core part of nursing is caring for people when they are at their most vulnerable.”

He concluded: “We are not saying that university degrees are the problem, but we do think that a nurse is much more than a set of GCSE and A level results.”

Julie Bailey, the founder of the Cure the NHS campaign, set up in the wake of the Mid Staffordshire nursing scandal, said: “Nurses’ training is already too academic, with little thought for the basic needs of patients.

“Compassion and attitude just don’t come into it any more. When nurses come and work in the wards, they don’t seem to want to care for people any more. It’s all about their self-worth and self-esteem.”

Ms Bailey’s mother, Bella, died at Stafford Hospital, one of at least 400 mainly elderly patients thought to have died due to poor nursing at the trust between 2005 and 2008. She said a “clear message” from the recent public inquiry into the scandal was that the selection of nursing students was too lax. “Nursing schools take on almost anybody because that’s how they are funded,” she said.

Welcoming the report and Mr Cameron’s intervention, she said: “For the first time there is recognition that something has gone wrong with nursing.”

Monica Dennis, from the group A Dignified Revolution, which campaigns for better treatment of elderly patients, said while nurses needed to be highly skilled “this should not be at the expense of the fundamental but essential aspects of nursing care and compassion, which often seem to be disregarded”. Lead members of the Forum called for potential nursing students to be interviewed.

Andrew Lansley, the Health Secretary, said: “This report highlights exactly why the Prime Minister set out our plans last week to improve the quality of nursing, and ensure that nurses can spend more of their time concentrating on caring for their patients. Our plans are based on established best practice, which we want to spread throughout the NHS, driving out poor performance.”