

EMBARGO: not for use before 0001 hours Thursday 12 December 2002

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT IN THE WAY WARD NURSING IS PLANNED, SAYS AUDITOR GENERAL

Over £1 billion is spent on nurses in Scotland each year. An Audit Scotland report for the Auditor General highlights the need for improved planning of the nursing workforce, better information to support this task and the introduction of measures of the quality of patient care to ensure we get value for money.

There are over 50,000 nurses in Scotland and the report says that workforce planning needs to be improved. Too few staff are dedicated to the important task of ensuring that the right number of nurses are in the right place at the right time. It says that lack of planning has resulted in wide variation in the number of nurses caring for patients in similar wards. Mr Black says:

“Nurses play an essential role in caring for patients and are a much valued NHS resource. Getting the right number of nurses in place and managing them effectively is a complex task but vitally important if we are to ensure that patients get the care they need and that the best use is made of resources. Nurse managers need good information on costs and quality to manage their staff effectively but there is significant variation in the availability of this information.

The Health Department has made a good start on workforce planning but additional work is needed to get nurse staffing levels right across Scotland. This requires sufficient staff time and a systematic approach to workforce planning based on sound information as well as professional judgement.”

The report shows wide and unexplained variation across hospitals in the **number of nurses (per bed)** caring for patients on similar wards. Some of this variation can be explained by differing patient needs but this is unlikely to offer a full explanation.

“Better comparative information is needed on nurse staffing levels to help to iron out some of these differences and ensure consistent standards of care for patients. We also need better measures of quality than those currently available” says Mr Black.

Just over a third of the wards reviewed (106 wards out of 271) had below the planned number of nurses in post. Understaffing puts pressure on staff in post and may compromise the quality of care. Staff shortages can contribute to higher use of bank and agency nurses. The report reveals an increase in expenditure on bank and agency nurses, from £25 million in 1997/98 to £35 million last year (2000/01).

No link could be established between ward staffing costs and the quality of care – mainly due to the lack of good data. The report calls for the development of **quality of care or outcome measures** that could be used to measure the cost-effectiveness of nursing and to inform appropriate nurse staffing levels.

The report makes a number of recommendations for action by trusts, NHS boards and the Health Department:

1. Health Boards should work with trusts to improve the management information available.
2. NHSScotland needs to develop and agree quality of care measures to enable the outcome of nursing care to be monitored.
3. Health Boards should take on the role of monitoring the way that workforce planning is carried out by trusts.

Audit Scotland will revisit the issues raised in this baseline report and assess progress against the recommendations.

For further information please contact Mandy Gallacher on 0131 624 9974 or

Katie Fleming on 0131 624 9970

Notes

1. **The Auditor General for Scotland**, Robert Black, is the Parliament's watchdog for ensuring propriety and value for money in the spending of public funds. He is responsible for investigating whether public spending bodies achieve the best possible value for money and adheres to the highest standards of financial management. He is independent and not subject to the control of any member of the Scottish Executive or the Parliament. The Auditor General is responsible for securing the audit of the Scottish Executive and most other public sector bodies except local authorities and fire and police boards - they are within the Account Commission's remit.
2. **Audit Scotland** is a statutory, independent body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act 2000. It provides services to the Auditor General for Scotland and the Accounts Commission. Together they ensure that the Scottish Executive and public sector bodies in Scotland are held to account for the proper, efficient and effective use of around £16 billion of public funds.
3. The report contains the first comparative information on nurse numbers, costs, and quality in six ward types across Scotland. NHS Dumfries and Galloway is named for good practice in workforce planning, and Lomond Primary Care Trust is named for its work on measuring quality of care.
4. The six ward types included in the study are: paediatrics, orthopaedics, acute medical receiving, gynaecology, long stay care of the elderly and psychiatry of old age
5. The report "Planning ward nursing – legacy or design?" is available in PDF format from the Audit Scotland web site www.audit-scotland.gov.uk