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Press release

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NHS in Scotland improving how it plans hospital nursing

An Audit Scotland report published today finds that the NHS in Scotland has made progress towards improving the planning and management of ward nursing.

The Health Department and NHS boards are addressing many of the recommendations in Audit Scotland's 2002 report on ward nursing. Work is underway in a number of areas including:

- improving recruitment and retention of nurses through a range of national initiatives;
- improving the information available to managers to plan the numbers of hospital nurses needed and how best to use these staff;
- developing information on the quality of nursing care to identify any areas for improvement;
- better management of bank and agency nurses.

The NHS now needs to build on this development work and address continuing issues, for example ensuring that workforce planning builds in enough time to cover predictable absences such as sick leave. It should also make sure that senior nurses have time to develop their leadership and clinical roles and needs to do more to develop information on the quality of nursing care so that this becomes part of routine management information.

Bank and agency nurses can be a useful way of filling temporary nursing needs. Audit Scotland has previously recommended that NHS boards review their use of bank and agency nurses and reduce their use of agency nurses which are a more expensive way of meeting temporary staffing needs. Between 2001/02 and 2005/06 there was a 17% reduction in the use of agency nurses across Scotland but the combined use of bank and agency nurses increased by 43 per cent. NHS boards and the Health Department need to monitor this trend and the reasons for it to ensure that quality of care is maintained and appropriate use is made of bank and agency staff. In 2005/06 bank and agency nurses cost £96 million – about 5.5% of the total nursing budget.

Over the three year period, 2002 – 2005, the number of whole time equivalent hospital nurses increased by 1,475. There has been little change in vacancy rates across the country since 2002. In the latest available information (March 2006), the total vacancy rate was 3.6%. Long term vacancies were low at 0.7%, but there are particular pressures in some boards and some specific areas of nursing such as intensive care, theatres and care of the elderly.

Robert Black, the Auditor General for Scotland, said: "Nurses are crucial to the delivery of good quality patient care and so it is good news that the health service has responded to the previous ward nursing report and is laying the foundations for better workforce planning in this area. I recognise that this is not an easy thing to get right. The NHS now needs to build on progress made and ensure it has the information needed to manage the workforce well. The use of bank and agency nurses also needs to be kept under review."

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Notes to editors

1. Nurses play a vital role in the delivery of patient care. Across Scotland there are over 55,000 whole time equivalent (WTE) nursing and midwifery staff, and four out of five nurses work in hospitals. The NHS in Scotland spends over £1 billion a year on hospital nurses.
2. WTE – whole time equivalent

3. Bank nurses are NHS employees contracted to work when required, often at short notice, to cover planned and unplanned shortfalls. They are paid at NHS rates. Agency nurses are employed by commercial nursing agencies: the NHS pays the agency a fee which covers the nurse's pay at levels set by the agency plus a commission to the agency.
4. The figures for the cost of bank and agency nurses in 2005/06 are for hospital and community nurses and midwives.
5. A table charting progress made against Audit Scotland's 2002 recommendations and corresponding updated recommendations can be found on pages 33-34.
6. The Nursing and Midwifery Workload and Workforce Planning Project report, containing SEHD recommendations on developing nursing workforce planning, can be found on the SEHD website at <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2004/04/19299/36370>
7. Board by board breakdowns are given for nursing and midwifery sickness absence rates (Exhibit 2), changes in staff in post (Exhibit 3), vacancy rates (Exhibits 4 to 6) and use of bank and agency nursing (Exhibits 10 to 14).
8. The report, *Planning ward nursing: legacy or design? A follow up report*, will be on Audit Scotland's website from Thursday 25 January. www.audit-scotland.gov.uk
9. The Auditor General is responsible for securing the audit of the Scottish Executive and most other public bodies in Scotland, except local authorities. He investigates whether spending bodies achieve the best possible value for money and adhere to the highest standards of financial management. The Auditor General is independent and is not subject to the control of the Scottish Executive or the Scottish Parliament.
10. Audit Scotland is a statutory body set up in April 2000, under the Public Finance and Accountability (Scotland) Act, 2000. It provides services to the Accounts Commission and the Auditor General for Scotland.