

Families left 'in crisis' by cuts to dementia nurses

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The number of nurses specialising in dementia and other mental health problems in the elderly has been cut by a fifth since 2010, according to "incredibly concerning" figures.

Psychiatric nurses treating older people have been among the hardest hit by a reduction in mental health staffing despite government pledges to prioritise the rise in dementia, analysis of NHS data for *The Times* shows.

While the overall number of NHS nurses has risen slightly over the past seven years, this has been due to in-

creases in acute hospital and maternity services, helped by a recruitment drive after the Mid Staffordshire scandal. Figures from NHS England show that the number of mental health nurses working for the health service fell by the equivalent of almost 5,000 full-time posts between May 2010 and May this year, a drop of more than 12 per cent.

Old age psychiatric nursing is among the worst hit specialisms, with 1,000 full-time posts gone since 2010, a fall of 22 per cent, to 3,541 posts.

Older patients often need more intense monitoring and are susceptible to problems with medication and side effects. A nurse's role also involves emo-

tionally supporting patients' families and helping patients stay independent for as long as possible.

Caroline Abrahams, charity director of Age UK, said: "An ageing population inevitably means we need more psychiatric nurses specialising in work with older people, so the fact their numbers have shrunk by a fifth over the last seven years is incredibly concerning.

"Historically, older people's mental health needs have often gone undiagnosed and been overlooked and these depressing figures provide no cause for optimism that the situation will improve any time soon." She called for urgent government action. With psychia-

trists for the elderly also overstretched, doctors say they are increasingly reliant on specialist nurses to help manage the rising need for treatment.

More than 850,000 people in Britain have dementia, a figure which is expected to pass a million within seven years.

Hilda Hayo, head of Dementia UK, said that the charity's specialist dementia nurses and helpline were picking up cases of families under increasing pressure as a result of the loss of nurses.

"These reductions are coming at a time when people live for longer but are not necessarily healthier — and dispersed families are unable to provide

the support needed," she said. "More families are going into crisis and having to make decisions which may result in earlier admission to hospital or a care facility due to the lack of community support."

A Department of Health spokesman said: "This government is committed to improving care for those with mental health conditions, which is why we have started one of the biggest expansions of services in Europe.

"Our ambition is to create 21,000 new posts by 2021 by supporting those already in the profession to stay and giving incentives to those considering a career in mental health."