

SOS call for 1,500 cancer nurses

A shortage of specialist hospital staff is having a 'devastating' effect, including cancellation of life-saving chemotherapy

Andrew Gregory Health Editor

Cancer patients face "life-threatening" delays to treatment because of a shortage of specialist nurses.

Some are told on the morning of hospital appointments not to attend because there are not enough staff. Others have chemotherapy cancelled repeatedly.

The NHS has begun a global recruit-

ment drive for tens of thousands of nurses, but the shortages are having a devastating impact, Britain's most senior nurse and cancer charities say.

NHS providers needed 1,411 specialist cancer nurses in the six months to September 2018, an analysis by the Royal College of Nursing shows. That figure was up 16% on the 1,213 vacancies for the same six-month period the year before.

The statistics, from NHS Digital, count advertised posts. NHS Digital says they are likely to understate the shortage because one advert can be used to fill many vacancies and not all hospitals advertise on the NHS Jobs website.

Dame Donna Kinnair, chief executive and general secretary of the Royal College of Nursing, said: "Chemotherapy

and radiotherapy are proven to save lives. Any delays in delivering them can be life-threatening, so the shortage of specialist cancer nurses across England we've uncovered means that patients' lives are inevitably being put at risk.

"People with cancer are worried and distressed enough as it is. They know all too well the impact delays can have on their prognosis."

Kinnair will tell the college's annual conference in Liverpool tomorrow that the shortage of specialist nurses is having a devastating impact on patients.

"What's even more worrying is that the situation is only going to get worse, as the budget for nurses' specialist training has been cut by over £100m in the past five years," she said.

A lead cancer nurse at one of Britain's 12 regional cancer centres, speaking on condition of anonymity, said: "Chemotherapy treatments are being postponed, cancer patients are waiting longer for pain relief and there is little or no time for communication with patients.

"The astounding thing is patients are so forgiving. Patients looking after each other is becoming increasingly common."

The nurse added: "Most people are so gracious, but the fact is that if delayed by more than one or two days the treatment may not be effective."

Rising numbers of cancer nurses who quit because of stress, burnout, a change of career or early retirement were worsening the shortage, experts said.

Lynda Thomas, chief executive of Macmillan Cancer Support, said the vacancy figures demonstrated "the significant crisis that now faces our cancer workforce".

"We urgently need a government plan," Thomas added. "This crisis needs a solution, and it needs one now."

The Department of Health and Social Care said plans were in place to hire an extra 1,500 cancer staff but conceded this was across all medical professions – not just nurses – and in any case will not be achieved until 2021. It insisted: "Improving cancer care and reducing waits continues to be a priority for the NHS."

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