

NURSES

Nurses have an important role to play in the community and specialist units as well as in general hospitals, says Andrew Cole.

Nearly 400,000 nurses work in the health service, most of them in hospital. Training to be a registered nurse takes three years and to be an enrolled nurse two years, but this latter qualification is being phased out. All nurses are answerable to the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting, which is responsible for standards in education, professional regulation and the protection of the public.

HOSPITAL NURSES

Although most nurses deliver hands-on care at the bedside, significant numbers also work in teaching or in management. Types of nurses you may encounter are: student, enrolled nurse, staff nurse, ward sister and charge nurse.

Most hospital nurses are general nurses, looking after people with a range of conditions. But there are also a large number of nurses who are specialists in areas such as cancer, intensive care, theatre nursing, care of children or AIDS. These nurses will normally be found in specialist units within a general hospital or in specialist hospitals.

In addition, mental health nurses work in psychiatric hospitals and mental handicap (or learning disabilities) nurses work in mental handicap hospitals.

The 'named nurse' clause in the Patient's Charter means that most patients are now assigned to an identified nurse who is responsible for their care while they are in hospital.

Put very simply, nurses provide care while doctors attempt to cure. In

the past, nurses were seen as 'handmaidens' to the doctor, but increasingly they now work as teams of equals. Eighty per cent of direct patient care in hospital is given by nurses. This involves not only such 'mechanical' tasks as taking temperatures and pulses, giving injections and bathing, but also more 'invisible' care, like listening, advising and monitoring a patient's progress.

In addition, nurses are increasingly taking the leading role in areas where cure may not be an option – for example, AIDS, chronic diseases like multiple sclerosis and motor neurone disease, and the care of elderly people and the dying.

NURSING HOMES

The growing number of nursing and residential homes are staffed by a mixture of general nurses and nurses with specialist knowledge in the care of elderly people.

COMMUNITY NURSES

A wide range of nurses work in the community, including health visitors, district nurses, practice nurses, school nurses, community psychiatric nurses and community mental handicap nurses. They are usually based in a GP practice, a specialist unit such as a mental health centre, or a health clinic.

In the community, nurses not only provide care, but also perform an important health promotion role.

Their work might encompass caring for the chronically sick child, advising the new mother, helping the patient recovering from surgery and supporting elderly people with chronic disability or illness.

USEFUL INFORMATION

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