Towards A Framework for Post Registration Nursing Careers:
A National Consultation

General Comments

- Many respondents sent written comments or notes of meetings to the RCN rather than filling in the consultation questionnaire so the RCN response is based in the main on content analysis and does not follow the exact questionnaire format.
- Many respondents felt the lack of detail made it difficult to comment – for example on how the career frameworks would be implemented, how they would be funded given that they span trusts activity, and so on.
- However there was also a realisation that this was a chicken-and-egg situation, and people were keen to be involved in further discussion and contribute their ideas. The RCN would welcome the opportunity to collaborate with the Department of Health and host joint workshops within the English regions to explore this further, in particular the identification of the policy levers needed to embed post registration career pathways into practice – both in the NHS and independent sectors.
- Further to the above some responses cited the need to link this MNC work to workforce planning, and to funding mechanisms for post registration education across the health care professions.
- Questions were also raised about how this work will link to the NHS review by Lord Darzi.
- Questions were also raised regarding how these career pathways link to pre registration nurse education and the NMC consultation on the same.

The Career Pathways

- Every response agreed there was a need for a more formalised post registration career pathway with clearly defined routes to advanced practice level posts. However there was no consensus about what these should be or how they should fit together.
- There were concerns too that the pathways could, unintentionally, become silos from which nurses found it difficult to move and change career direction. Plus patients do not necessarily fit neatly into these pathways so there has to be some flexibility around them.
- One solution proposed was that nurses ‘major’ and ‘minor’ in the pathways and that post registration nurse education is modular to allow and ‘mix and match’ approach.
- The RCN has real concerns that the pathways do not fit the work of nurses employed in general practice – both practice nurses and nurse practitioners in primary health care. This group of nurses span the work in long term care and first contact pathways – indeed this is indicated in
the joint Department of Health/RCN research that surveyed the work of nurses at advanced practice levels\(^1\).

- The RCN believes it is right that they continue to do so as this is in the best interests of patients who receive the overwhelming majority of their health care in the primary and community health sectors. Indeed there is a whole argument here about preserving a pathway for advanced generalist nurses, most likely to be employed in general practice. Indeed developing further an advanced generalist nurse pathway to include skills in mental health first contact and case management\(^2\).
- The above is important to consider given developments in medical careers which are becoming increasingly specialised and specialist.
- Some responses also suggested additional career pathways in end of life care, and care of the older person.

### Mental Health and Psychosocial Care

- There was some confusion over what was in this pathway. For example did it pertain only to people with long term and enduring mental illness? Where did care of people with a learning disability fit?
- The view of RCN members in learning disability and mental health was that these two areas of care could NOT be collapsed into one pathway and that there was a definite need for both a defined pathway in learning disability, and one in mental health focused on the management of long term enduring mental illness and first contact work regarding acute episodes of mental illness.
- Learning Disability nurses also highlighted the recent Mencap and Healthcare Commission reports into Learning Disability services as supporting the need to retain nurses with these skills.
- There was agreement that a general level of knowledge, skill and competence in mental health was needed in every pathway.

### Children, Family and Public Health

- Some felt that public health should not be a defined pathway but should cut across all five pathways.
- The RCN Children and Young People’s Field of Practice discussed the pathways in detail at a one day consultation event and ascertained member views via e-networks.
- They felt that any framework needed to promote holistic care and that individual children and young people would need nurses able to work across all pathways to address complex health care needs.
- Children are explicitly referenced in the title of this pathway which is out of kilter with the other pathway titles. If ‘children’ is to remain explicitly in the title of the first pathway, one possible way forward

\(^1\) DH/RCN (2005) Maxi Nurses: Advanced and Specialist Nursing Roles RCN: London
\(^2\) Research by the Health Services Management Centre in Birmingham that compared the work of nurses practitioners in primary care with physician assistants pointed up a lack of confidence and knowledge in mental health within the nurse practitioner group.
would be to subdivide all streams/pathways into ‘adult’ and ‘child’ as all the possible streams/pathways relate to both age ranges or alternatively remove the explicit mention of ‘children’ from the first pathway title.

**Conclusion**

- Whilst RCN members welcome the principle of a framework and recognised the need to articulate clear career pathways there was no agreement over the specifics of what these should be. Many members said they could not comment on the actual pathways because they felt there was a lack of detail. Further evidence and discussion is clearly required to move forward in this debate and the RCN looks forward to actively participating in the next phase of the Department of Health’s consultation process.