

## SUBMISSION FROM RCN SCOTLAND

### **Introduction**

The RCN submitted written evidence to the Committee's inquiry into Women and Work. The evidence provided here should be read in conjunction with our original submission to the inquiry.

Employment policies must enable organisations to secure the workforce they need, and to allow people with very complex lives to participate in paid work. An organisation's work-life balance policy should recognise the importance of helping its employees balance their work and home life by offering flexible working arrangements.

The RCN recognises that achieving the necessary balance between meeting the needs of the organisation to deliver health services, and the needs of staff, is a continuing challenge for both employers and employees. However, where flexible working arrangements are not routinely considered and agreed to, employers must consider whether they risk losing experienced staff as a result, and the potential consequences that this may have on their ability to deliver health services.

### **What is flexible working?**

Flexible working is a phrase that describes any working pattern adapted to accommodate a better work-life balance. There are a variety of flexible working options that could be taken alone or combined to suit an individual's circumstances, such as: part-time working; flexi-time; annualised hours; compressed hours; job-sharing; term-time working; swapping hours; voluntary reduced working time; career breaks; working from home; and flexible shiftworking / self-rostering. Each system offers its own particular benefits to the employee and employer.

Under the law an employer must consider seriously any application made to them. However, they don't have to agree to it if there is a good organisational reason not to. Employees have the right to ask for flexible working – not the right to have it.

The RCN conducts regular surveys of members that explore nurses' working patterns and how they feel about them. In terms of work-life balance, three elements of working patterns are important:

- how nurses work i.e. part-time, full-time or jobsharing. The continued ageing of the nursing profession is significant because there are fewer nurses who work full-time and longer hours
- shift patterns
- hours of work.

### **Supporting the work-life balance**

Good employers respect the needs of all staff to balance work and life outside of work. They understand that equal access to modern working arrangements leads to a committed and motivated workforce and a healthy and safe work environment in which team work flourishes. In turn this creates an organisation able to attract and retain staff and reduce absenteeism and other costs associated with work-related stress.

The effective development of employee-friendly policies should meet the RCN's principles and values which include:

- consultation with nurses – policies should be agreed and not imposed if they are to be effective
- flexible working arrangements should provide mutual benefits to both staff and managers
- recognition of the diversity of nurses' lives
- equal consideration for nurses with and without caring responsibilities
- developing and maintaining a team work culture in which nurses understand each other's needs and support each other to achieve healthy work-life balance
- an appraisal of the needs of nursing students in educational establishments and while on clinical placements.

### **Ageing workforce**

The RCN's policy response to an ageing workforce, *Older but wiser?*, states that:

- Financial factors which might exert a "pull" factor over older nurses in their decision to continue to work include flexible working hours to meet family commitments, and flexibility in pension provision.
- Flexible working options for older nurses should be more available, recognising the physical and mental stress which many older nurses experience
- Working options should include moving to less stressful areas of work where older nurses' experience can make a valuable contribution, and flexible hours of working
- Pensions for older nurses should not be affected adversely by taking flexible working options

An ageing workforce means that the health service has to look at ways of encouraging older nurses to work for longer. This means providing flexible working hours towards the end of nurses' working lives and pensions schemes that allow staff to step-down to lower grade jobs in the run up to retirement, while protecting their pension entitlement.

### **NHS Culture**

Scotland has good policies in place that require NHS employers to give reasonable consideration to flexible working requests. The Partnership Information Network (PIN) guidelines on supporting the work life balance provide a guide to what the minimum standard of practice should be. The guidelines state that:

- Flexibility and support for the work-life balance are issues critical to the NHS in terms of workforce development, recruitment and retention and maintaining a committed, motivated workforce.
- NHS organisations should seek to balance the needs of their staff with the requirements of delivering high quality services for patients.
- Where organisations feel that service demands challenge this, conscious efforts must be made, in partnership with staff and their representatives, to find creative and effective solutions.

It is our experience that, in some areas, flexible working requests are not granted because of an ingrained cultural perception that the needs of the health service cannot accommodate such requests.

Many nursing staff work shift patterns and shift length varies considerably between employer groups and specialties. The culture of the NHS in Scotland is, predominantly, one of rigid shift patterns, typically 12.5 hours long depending on the employer group and speciality. In many cases, staff who request flexible working do so because their personal circumstances are not, or are no longer, suited to working such rigid shift patterns, or they no longer feel able to carry out the duties required of them in specific areas of a hospital. Some examples from our membership include:

- A district nurse working part time had set working days due to child care for her grandchildren. Her mother in law had dementia, living more than an hour away, and she had a further commitment to a sister in law with profound learning difficulties. Her employer wanted her to start working weekends due to change in the system. She was the sole carer for her mother in law at weekends. Flexible working was declined.
- A practice nurse with a carer commitment for her husband and severe stress issues requested a reduction in hours to address her work life balance. This was declined.
- A nurse who had been warned about her sickness absence due to a back problem asked for a reduction in hours. This was declined.

We are happy to elaborate on the content of this submission during the Committee's meeting.

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## References

*Spinning plates: establishing a work-life balance*, a guidance document for RCN reps, produced as part of the RCN's Working Well Initiative.

[http://www.rcn.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/156166/003214.pdf](http://www.rcn.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/156166/003214.pdf)

PIN Guidelines on supporting the work life balance

<http://www.staffgovernance.scot.nhs.uk/improving-employee-experience/working-well/carers/guidance-for-managers/> (see section titled *Work-life balance policies*)

Buchan, James and O'May, Fiona and McCann, Dolly (2008) *Older ... but Wiser? Policy responses to an ageing nursing workforce*. Project Report. Royal College of Nursing, Edinburgh, Edinburgh.

RCN Scotland's written evidence to the Equal Opportunities Committee's inquiry into Women and Work

[http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4\\_EqualOpportunitiesCommittee/RCN\\_Scotland.pdf](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4_EqualOpportunitiesCommittee/RCN_Scotland.pdf)