Warning 'Obamacare' could lead to US poaching thousands of UK nurses

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The NHS risks losing thousands of nurses to the US if it fails to value and support existing nursing staff, the chief executive of Health Education England has warned.

Speaking at the body’s first annual conference, Professor Ian Cumming said the NHS would be “stuffed” if UK-trained nurses left to plug a massive shortfall in staff across the Atlantic.

He said workforce planning had to become international in its scope, “taking into account the global movement of people”, including a surge in the number of EU nurses wanting to work in the UK.

Professor Cumming noted the “huge number” of nurses and midwives from Spain and Portugal who have been applying to join the UK register.

On the other hand, he warned the advent of “Obamacare” could prove a drain on the NHS. The resulting expansion of health provision could see the US “coming shopping” to fill a 100,000 shortfall in nurses over the next three years.

“If you’re offered a three-year fixed term contract on a similar salary with the opportunity to do an MA and accommodation provided – and you get to live in New York, San Francisco or Hawaii, or
anywhere else you like – if you’re in your 20s and a newly qualified nurse then you might be interested,” he said.

Professor Cumming highlighted the tricky balancing act needed to ensure there was the right number of nurses. “It costs £30-40,000 to train a nurse so if we train too many that is an extraordinary waste of money so we have to get the balance right between over-supply and under-supply,” he told the conference last Thursday.

He also gave a pre-view of Health Education England’s 15-year strategy, due to be launched in coming weeks.

The vision sets out key challenges in training and educating the future healthcare workforce, including the need to keep pace with changing demographics, increased patient knowledge and expectation, and technology advances.

In recognition, Health Education England is launching a campaign to educate NHS staff on how far the field of genomics has come and the impact it will have on their work – for example, hand-held devices that can test people’s genes already available.

Professor Cumming also stressed the need to explore new roles within healthcare that blurred the boundaries between professions and making the most of skilled and talented workers See below

“HEE conference delegates heard from Casey Brooks, a former armed forces medic who now works as "lead associate clinician" in the cardiology department at Portsmouth Hospital Trust.

Despite having a vast array of clinical skills and experience in war zones and working on oil rigs, he found he was only able to undertake support worker roles in the NHS until the job at Portsmouth was specially created for him.

However, he said he had encountered opposition and suspicion from nursing staff, who feared he was encroaching on their territory.

"The biggest barrier [to new roles] in the NHS is nursing and nursing staff,” he claimed. "When I arrived I thought it would be the doctors who’d feel I was taking their job and role but not at all – they saw I was here to help."