A senior nurse at one of Wales’s busiest accident and emergency departments has described a weekend night shift as more stressful than working in a warzone.

The sister at the University Hospital of Wales in Cardiff, who previously nursed soldiers on the frontline during the 2003 Iraq invasion, said she had to make decisions “that put patients at risk and put staff under extreme pressure”.

“I can guarantee that the nurses with me in the emergency unit today are facing higher levels of stress than we ever did in that warzone”

A&E sister
She described how a pregnant woman miscarried on the floor of a triage area in view of strangers and how she was forced to leave an unconscious patient in the care of junior staff and “hope to God he didn’t aspirate, have a massive bleed or fit”.

“I spent weeks in and out of the trenches being shelled, nursing soldiers under trolleys as the warning sirens went off,” she wrote in an account of her experiences. “I know what stress is.

“I know what it is like to work under pressure and yet I can guarantee that the nurses with me in the emergency unit today are facing higher levels of stress than we ever did in that warzone,” she said. “We cannot as a senior nursing team continue to put our staff and our patients under this stress any longer.”

She detailed how the unit was unable to cope with the number of patients coming in due to a lack of beds and experienced staff.

At one point during the night there were five seriously ill patients being looked after by just two qualified nurses. “These were patients that should have been looked after by at least one qualified nurse each, if not two,” warned the unnamed nurse.

She said that when she got home she got into bed and “sobbed my heart out”, and could not sleep for worrying about the decisions she had made. But she goes on to say that “it was not an unusual night”.

The nurse’s account of a Sunday night shift, described as “shocking” by nursing leaders, was originally shared with managers at a meeting with emergency unit staff last month.

It was not originally intended to be made public, but was found pinned to a hospital notice board and copies were subsequently circulated to Welsh media.

“It describes the very real, very challenging level of serious, complex care that is being provided on an almost daily basis.”

Andrew Cairns

Managers at Cardiff and Vale University Health Board, which runs the hospital, have said they are taking a range of measures to cope with "extraordinary demand", including opening more beds, bringing in extra staff, re-deploying staff from elective to non-elective care and from non-clinical to clinical duties.

Chief executive Adam Cairns said that while the nurse’s account was difficult to hear it had acted as a “powerful motivator” when it came to finding solutions to “these significant challenges”.

Tina Donnelly, director of the Royal College of Nursing in Wales, was “shocked” by the contents of the account.

“I don’t think I have ever read anything as shocking,” she told Nursing Times. “We have got to look into the trauma faced by clinical staff who are working under constant pressure right now without seemingly having any relief.

“This is an example of a senior ward sister having to go off duty thinking she has not delivered appropriate care due to the huge demand and challenges in the way the area is managed,” she said.

“This nurse has demonstrated that she had an inadequate skill mix, insufficient staffing levels to deal with the demand and this is not an isolated case,” added Ms Donnelly, who has herself served in Afghanistan.
“This is an example of a senior ward sister having to go off duty thinking she has not delivered appropriate care due to the huge demand and challenges”

Tina Donnelly

She revealed the RCN in Wales had been working with staff in the A&E department in question for the last four months “over staffing issues and complexities of care and skills mix” and had met with the director of nursing and chief executive.

She said there was a need to review escalation policies and staffing. “There were seemingly quite a lot of clinical staff that needed supervision and not the seniority in the nursing staff to deliver that – this is exactly the kind of issue we have been raising with the health board,” she said.

"You cannot cut corners in emergency care areas where you know you could potentially be putting nurses at risk but more importantly patients at risk,” she told Nursing Times.

“This nurse has shown tremendous courage in speaking as she did to managers and we need the health board to demonstrate – not just to her but to all nurses there – that they have listened and will actively recruit a skill mix that is conducive to the patient acuity levels in those departments,” she said.

However, Ms Donnelly went on stress the problems at the hospital were symptomatic of system-wide issues in the NHS in Wales, including nursing staff shortages and increased demand, which also affected services across the UK.

The RCN estimates there is a shortage of 1,000 nurses in Wales and is supporting a private member’s bill to enshrine safe staffing levels in law – currently being examined by the Welsh Assembly.

Ms Donnelly said other possible solutions for reducing pressure on emergency departments included introducing seven-day working for GPs, streamlining GP appointment systems and greater co-location of primary care and emergency care services allowing patients to be swiftly diverted.

Welsh first minister Carwyn Jones said the nurse’s story demonstrated the “great pressures” facing many hospitals.

He said the Welsh Assembly government was taking steps to reduce pressure on A&E departments including improving the provision of GP services around Wales.