Letters

Nurses' loyalty may be underestimated

EDITOR—The nursing shortage described by Finlayson et al is not new. It has been a recurrent problem over decades, and it is set to worsen. The proposed new expenditure on the NHS will have a profound, but as yet unknown, effect on the demand for nursing staff, such that serious shortages in the short run are likely to constrain planned capacity expansions.

The authors conclude that recruitment is less problematic than retention. Our own analysis indicates that attrition from the nursing profession is not as severe as from teaching. We used data from the British household panel survey (a representative sample of the United Kingdom's population) to trace all qualified nurses and teachers under the age of 60. We found that 42.6% of nurses, compared with 53.9% of teachers, had left their professions between 1991 and 1996. Roughly equal proportions were not working (14.5% v 15.1%). Of those who had left the nursing profession for other work, 50% were employed in other caring occupations, such as social or child care; only 20% of leaving teachers remained employed in education.

Comparing nurses who stayed and left, those who left were significantly older and less likely to be doing two jobs. They reported less shift working, earned on average 7% less, and expressed more satisfaction with their jobs than those remaining in nursing. Some amount of wastage is to be expected from any profession, and nurses seem to compare favourably with teachers. But 33% of working nurses, compared with 13% of teachers, reported that they were not satisfied with their jobs. What keeps these nurses in nursing? Is it dedication to the profession, home ties, or lack of better opportunities?

Deepening shortages in future years may generate higher rewards that mitigate pay inequalities in nursing: teachers in the sample from the British household panel survey averaged 50% higher incomes than nurses. The concern is, however, that we will continue to rely on nurses' goodwill.

Heather M Gage, senior lecturer.
Department of Economics, University of Surrey, Guildford, Surrey GU2 7XH h.gage@surrey.ac.uk

Rosemary Pope, professor of nurse education.
European Institute of Health and Medical Sciences, University of Surrey

Fiona Lake, research assistant.
Goldman Sachs, London EC4A 2BB