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## Executive Summary

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### Position Paper on Occupational Health Nurse Education, Funding and Regulation

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## The Faculty of Occupational Health Nursing

November 2015

### Introduction

The Faculty of Occupational Health Nursing (FOHN) Development Group (FDG) has put together a position paper to consider the current issues in relation to the availability of validated education courses, funding of education, regulated standards of practice, and revalidation for occupational health (OH) nursing in the United Kingdom (UK). The FDG believes that significant challenges exist with the current system of nurse education, funding and regulation. Our purpose in presenting the paper is to draw attention to the issues associated with these matters and to inform the Nursing & Midwifery Council (NMC) and professional bodies about the impact these have on OH nurses' ability to deliver safe and effective occupational health practice.

The new FOHN is currently in development having been created in response to calls for OHNs to have a single, unified voice for the profession. The agreed vision for the FOHN is that it will exist to promote excellence in the education, research and evidence based practice of all OHNs for the benefit of the working population. In future, the FOHN will be central to OHN standard setting for education, training and practice supervision.

Appropriately qualified and supervised OHNs make a significant contribution to improving the health, wellbeing and productivity of the working population. But in the FDG's view the issues described place employees, practitioners and their organisations at unnecessary risk, threatening to jeopardise public safety. Left unaddressed, there will be a gradual erosion of the professional standing of OH nursing and the FDG urges the regulator to take swift and effective action to remedy matters.

## Key Issues

### 1. Education

Currently, a number of different educational programmes exist across Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK. As a result OHNs are graduating from courses with very mixed levels of experience, knowledge and skills. There is particular concern about the variation that exists between Specialist Community Public Health Nurse (SCPHN) Occupational Health (OH) courses, and it is clear that some do not include sufficient OH specific content. Although the range of tasks and duties assigned to an OH nurse (OHN) will always vary because of sector specific and regulatory driven requirements (as well as the particular needs of the organisation e.g. culture and available budget), there are nonetheless a core set of technical skills and competencies required to undertake OHN job tasks. In the FDG's experience, too many OHNs are graduating from SCPHN (OH) courses having been inadequately prepared to work in the specialism. Specifically, they are not being adequately equipped to carry out essential tasks such as needs assessments, case management (especially for common psychological health conditions) and risk assessments to the levels required. Moreover, they often lack the knowledge and skills required to be credible in business.

For the delivery of excellent and auditable nursing practice that offers effective public protection this situation must be addressed.

Recommendations:

- SCPHN (OH) courses to be more closely aligned with the needs of future OH strategy and evidence based provision.
- Current SCPHN (OH) courses to be adapted to include more directly relevant and specific OH content. The current standards of proficiency and SPHN (OH) course content to be re-written to more accurately reflect specific learning outcomes in the form of essential skill sets or skills clusters.
- Competencies to be agreed and more closely aligned with both the theory and practice of OH to match the key competencies that OHNs need across the breadth of practice.
- A formal regulatory mechanism to be adopted whereby senior OHNs in the profession can input feedback into standards for OHN education. Otherwise the NMC needs to develop more active relationships with stakeholder groups.
- Shared learning with other SCPHNs not to be mandatory. Shared learning with other relevant multi-disciplinary groups and professionals must be mandated as it is an essential pre-requisite for OH practice, as well as an evidence based model of learning.
- Address the differences between validated and non-validated courses. Agree appropriate consistent standards and a high quality, standard qualification for both.
- Consider the possibility of OHNs obtaining a recognised qualification through a flexible modular programme with core and specific training requirements.

- Make standards for successful completion of courses more congruent between HEIs and develop a quality assurance process to demonstrate this for potential employers.
- Mandate HEI's to make more regular and detailed declarations confirming that the standards for the preparation of course teachers are being met in full and students have unlimited access to an appropriately qualified practitioner whilst in education.
- Agree with SCPHN (OH) course providers to seek alternatives to NMC validation for post-registration programmes preparing OHNs for practice.
- Review the requirement for students to assume supernumerary status and find alternative assessment options that better align with the practicalities of what is reasonable due to the different employment situations in which OHN's work (a more flexible approach).
- Raise the profile of OH nursing by folding a dialogue with the Chief Nursing Officer (Department of Health) to ensure that careers within OH nursing are appropriately reflected in documents or models associated with Department of Health strategy for modernising nursing careers.
- Adopt a collaborative approach between the NMC, FOHN and the National School of Occupational Health (NSOH) to define a more relevant model of OHN education in future.
- Centres of excellence to be identified throughout the country for OH education. The NSOH and the FOHN to provide endorsement for NMC validated courses based on relevant multidisciplinary learning as identified by a competency skills assessment.
- OH courses to be developed on the principles of Advanced Practice, with an OH strategic reference group (to include members of the FOHN). A post qualification period of professional supervision to be mandated for those SCPHN (OH) registrants not qualified to Advanced Practitioner level.
- Designated members of the FOHN to play an important role as preceptors, and providing informal and formal supervision to nurses who have newly qualified and / or are not working at an advanced level but who want to raise and maintain standards. The FOHN to also explore the development of membership and fellowship standards as part of a career framework model.
- Incentivise entry to course teacher and practice teacher qualification (and if this is not possible, as a minimum, ensure more structured input from senior practitioners in the field of OH).

## **2. Funding**

Educational sponsorship for SCPHN courses is more readily available from the National Health Service (NHS) for health visitors and school nurses, than it is for nurses choosing to practice in OH. Likewise, in the private sector, obtaining financial support from employers is also difficult because it can be hard to justify the benefits of employing qualified OHNs versus non-OH qualified registered nurses for employers with limited resources. As a result, most OHN trainees self-fund which together with difficulties associated with securing practice placements reduces the numbers enrolling on courses and has a consequential

effect on the flow of practitioners into the field. Added to which, there is insufficient funding for practice teacher courses so most do not hold an OH qualification.

Recommendations:

- The FOHN to work jointly with FOM, and the NSOH to ensure that the rationale for intervention from qualified OHNs is more visible to employers.
- Conduct an urgent review of public and private sector OHN educational funding in order to identify the best solutions to the problem and options to improve numbers entering the field of OH nursing.
- Set up bursaries in the NHS to assist students with funding for courses.
- Within their budgets for work health and wellbeing, The Department of Health and the devolved UK Governments to consider offering bursaries for non-NHS nurses who wish to study to either qualify as OHNs or OHN Practice Teachers.

### **3. Regulation**

Deficiencies with SCPHN (OH) based education and funding are compounded by associated problems with OHN regulation, registration and the way in which OH qualifications are recorded in the UK. In combination, these issues marginalise good practitioners without the SCPHN (OH) qualification, and cause confusion over competence to practice amongst nurses and purchasers of services.

Recommendations:

- Introduce a protected title for those who have completed an approved programme with a tiered route through to recognition as an Advanced Practitioner.
- Remove the SCPHN annotation only once a register of Advanced Practice for OH is set up – suitably qualified OHNs to have Advanced Practitioner status annotation on the NMC nursing register.
- In conjunction with representatives from OH nursing, the current transitional arrangement for SCPHN nurses to move into OH nursing after only ten weeks training to be urgently reviewed and withdrawn until such time as the current SCPHN (OH) educational issues are resolved.
- Introduce a clear pathway for newly qualified OHNs starting with junior nurses and progressing through defined stages to a leadership position (incorporating provision for those who may not want to progress to a senior level). Support the pathway by a system of preceptorship as provided by senior OHN personnel in both the public, private and independent sectors.
- Revalidation to incorporate guidance for OHNs working across a wide range of practice settings i.e. professional development (reviewed by another OH registrant), reflective practice that drives public protection and practice development.

The FDG is calling for the NMC and other associated bodies to review the current system through which proficiency to practice is determined and specifically to ensure that in future there is increased consultation with senior nurse practitioners and decision makers in OH.

The FDG wants to work collaboratively to ensure that occupational health nurse education and regulation is suitable for the needs of both the working population and employers in the future, making OH nursing a career of choice.

We welcome the opportunity of opening up a meaningful dialogue with key stakeholders to agree a joint way forward.

The full report can be down loaded from [www.fohn.org.uk](http://www.fohn.org.uk).

### Next Steps

The position paper is intended as a precursor to a research based survey to be undertaken by the FOHN in early 2016 seeking feedback from the OH nursing community in the UK. The aim will be to obtain data about the profession itself; the requirements for education and standard setting; and to seek information about the ideal structure and functions of a FOHN going forward to ensure that it delivers maximum value for members as well as improving the experience of recipients of OH services. The findings from this survey will be incorporated into an updated position paper to be made available on the FOHN website before mid-2017.

It is hoped that use of this dynamic methodology will provide a much needed demographic view of OH practitioners and practice in the UK, captured as part of a 'living' document that engages the OH community with the process of building the FOHN, as well as helping the organisation itself to develop as an entity.

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