

Retired nurses return to boost flagging UK health sector

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Briton Debs Helps retired earlier this year and could have been enjoying a well-deserved rest after a busy nursing career.

But like thousands of other retirees from the UK's state-run National Health Service (NHS), she has put on her uniform again.

For about 10 hours a week, Helps, 55, works at the GP surgery in Plymouth, southwest England, where she used to be based, and trains newer recruits.

"I could just stop," she told AFP. "It's just the fact that I didn't feel quite ready to stop because I like this job and I enjoy my mentoring."

Years of budget cuts and the additional pressures of the COVID-19 pandemic have left the UK's beloved NHS on its knees.

There are huge waiting lists for treatment and a staffing crisis, with not enough doctors and nurses to deal with patients.

At the same time, a cost-of-living crisis fueled by high inflation has seen nurses walk out on strike to demand better pay and conditions.

In July—as the NHS celebrated 75 years since it was founded—the government launched a 15-year plan to recruit hundreds of thousands of new staff.

The recruitment is needed, with 112,000 vacancies currently and predictions it could rise to 360,000 by 2037 if nothing is done.

The plan is to recruit 300,000 professionals and convince more younger retirees to come back to work for a few hours or days a month to provide care.

As such, it recently relaxed the rules on combining retirement pensions with additional income.

Some 4,600 (44 percent) of the 10,300 nurses who retired between July 2021 and June 2022 returned to work within 12 months—up four percent on the previous year.

The figure for all recently retired medical staff was 37 percent, according to NHS figures.

"This particular scheme is really about asking our staff who are retiring... how they want to work, what they would like to do, and see how we can match them to the needs of our NHS," said Navina Evans, head of people and training, at NHS England.

Flexibility

Helps works on a flexible contract, with no long-term commitment.

"I just work when I want," she said.

"So, I can say I'm going to work on Thursdays and then I do, and... I take three weeks off for Christmas, it's far more flexible.

"There's a dreadful shortage of nurses, a dreadful shortage of skilled nurses. So (the GP surgery) is very happy for me to work very flexibly."

As part of its long-term plan, the NHS ultimately hopes to encourage up to 130,000 staff to work longer over the next 15 years.

Since October 1, caregivers have been able to enjoy greater flexibility, going into "semi-retirement".

A pilot scheme allows retired doctors to conduct consultations remotely by registering on a dedicated platform.

"We looked at all the potential options to make sure we have the right workforce to meet the needs of our populations now, in five, 10 and 50 years' time," said NHS England's Evans.

The main nurses' union, the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), welcomed the measures but pointed out the desperate need to fund recruitment in hospitals.

The NHS—one of the biggest employers in Europe—costs some £190 billion (\$238 billion) a year to run and has 1.2 million staff in England alone.

Adequate funding has always been an issue and experts say the pandemic and blocks on foreign staff after Brexit has made the situation worse.

"You can't recruit your way out of a retention crisis," said RCN general secretary Pat Cullen, calling for more action to keep experienced staff.

"The plan must not forget that effective ways to attract people into the profession is to pay staff fairly and demonstrate there are options for career progression," she added.

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