

Tending to the care-giver



The country's sick and elderly are bearing the brunt of an acute nursing shortage that shows little sign of being eradicated in the short term.

SA's chronic nursing shortage is aggravated by the high demand for SA nurses overseas, particularly in the UK, Canada, Australia and the Middle East.

"The popularity of our nurses in other countries is a reflection of the high quality of the training and expertise of SA nurses," says Eileen Brannigan, group nursing director at Netcare.

According to media reports, 2 114 SA nurses took up posts in British hospitals in 2001 alone, with thousands having departed SA since then.

Tough working conditions locally don't help. At least 18,4% of SA's 190 449 nurses no longer practice their profession — at least not within the country's formal hospital infrastructure — according to the SA Nursing Council's register.

"We believe that the problem cannot simply be addressed by increasing nurses' salaries," says Brannigan. "We need a collective effort by the entire industry — both the private and public sectors — to train and retain the skills needed."

Netcare has a multifaceted strategy for training and retaining nursing skills, as well as other scarce health-care professionals like pharmacists and paramedics.

"We realised the need for aggressive

action. So we increased our nurse training budget 49% to R59m this year," says Brannigan.

This year 3 410 nurses and paramedics enrolled in Netcare's Training Academy, 1 000 more than last year.

It takes four years to qualify as a registered nurse, and SA produces about 4 000 registered nurses a year.

"With the industry shortage sitting at about 50 000 registered nurses, the need to train more is obvious," says Brannigan.

Because the nursing shortage is so critical, Netcare has put in place other measures to alleviate the situation.

For instance, says Brannigan, "we are fast-tracking non-nursing staff to assist with the less technical aspects of care."

Netcare is now the only hospital group to introduce technical training specialities, such as an ICU technician and a surgical technologist.

In addition, nurses who have left the profession for various reasons are being encouraged to return to work on a flexi-time basis. And Netcare has linked up with the Homecoming Revolution, a resource for South Africans planning to return to the country.

Of course, staff numbers are important, but so too is the quality of care. A recent assessment by The Monitor Study gave SA's private health-care sector a first-class rating for quality of care. ■

