Student nurse burnout

As a personal tutor to mental health nursing students, my conversations are often shaped by their encounters with the harsh realities of clinical practice. Time and again, I hear stories of racism, harassment, bullying, and exposure to violence and aggression. This is juxtaposed against their personal health and financial challenges whilst juggling academic work. Sadly, these experiences that are far from isolated and echo concerns reflected widely in the literature and across the sector. Nursing is the backbone of the UK's health and social care system. But we are at a crisis point. The NHS is grappling with a profound staffing and financial crisis, and the long-term sustainability of the system hinges on a strong nursing workforce. Alarmingly, many student nurses are already burnt out or considering leaving before they even register as nurses. If we do not act now, the profession risks a mass exodus of students that could push the NHS into further crisis.

The NHS is haemorrhaging nurses. Chronic staff shortages, increasing patient demands, and limited resources have created intolerable conditions. Many nurses feel overworked, overlooked, and emotionally depleted. Compassion fatigue is a phenomenon that occurs when nurses have prolonged exposure to patients suffering and trauma, leading to emotional exhaustion and psychological distress (Joinson, 1992). Burnout is characterised by emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach & Leiter, 2016). Rates of burnout among nurses are endemic, with up to 91.1% of nurses experiencing moderate to high levels of burnout (Galanis et al., 2023).

Yet into this landscape, we continue to funnel thousands of student nurses, unpaid, under-resourced, and increasingly disillusioned. The NHS Long Term Workforce Plan sets out a bold aim to increase nursing student numbers by 80% by 2031/32 (NHS England, 2023). This

ambition is intended to bolster the profession's capacity and futureproof the workforce. But with 21% of nursing students currently dropping out and 46% considering leaving (Nursing, 2024), is this target realistic—or just empty political rhetoric?

According to the Royal College of Nursing (RCN), reaching this target would require around 4,000 *additional* students each year (NHS England, 2023). Yet many students are already struggling. Financial hardship is the most cited reason for attrition. Since the removal of government bursaries in 2016, student nurses now face tuition fees of approximately £27,000—set to rise in August 2025. The RCN has suggested measures to improve student nurse recruitment and reduce attrition, such as loan forgiveness for long-term NHS service and increased financial support (Royal College of Nursing, 2025). While these could ease burnout and dropout rates, they depend on significant Government investment and a sustained commitment to nursing as a valued profession.

Student nurses must complete 2,300 hours of unpaid clinical practice hours during their three-year course, often working 12 hour shifts, including nights and weekends. This severely limits their ability to earn an income alongside their studies. Amidst a cost-of-living crisis, they are effectively the unpaid labour force of the NHS. They are plugging critical workforce gaps while enduring the same pressures as qualified staff, without the pay, power, or recognition. They are also exposed to the unfiltered reality of UK nursing. Student nurses commonly experience violence during their clinical placements. 81% of student nurses have experienced non-physical aggression, 56% experienced physical violence, and 40% encountered sexual harassment (Hallett et al, 2021) . Bullying and horizontal aggression from peers or colleagues) are rife. Positioned at the bottom of the healthcare hierarchy, students are particularly vulnerable due their subordinate position. The profession still bears the scars of what Meissner provocatively described as "nurses eating their young" (Meissner, 1986) a pattern in which

experienced nurses suppress new voices and ideas, reinforcing toxic cultures and stifling innovation. Sadly, this remains relevant today with such dynamics continuing to erode morals and contribute to early career attrition (Warrender, 2022). Alarmingly, the number of nurses leaving the profession within five years of registration has increased by 67% since 2021 (Royal College of Nursing, 2024).

Following a post-pandemic surge in interest, applications for nursing degrees have sharply declined—dropping by 35% since their peak in 2021(Royal College of Nursing, 2025). This decline coincides with increased tuition fees, ongoing workforce instability, and growing public disillusionment. Gone are the days when NHS workers were clapped for by the public, royals, and Members of Parliament. However the limiting portrayal of nurses being akin to angels and heros during the COVID-19 crisis created an unrealistic portrayal of nursing. Students driven by idealistic or altruistic motivations encountered a stark and disillusioning reality upon entering the clinical placements (Judge & Fisher, 2024).

Mental Health Nursing: A Unique Challenge

A further complexity for mental health students lies in professional regulation. Current Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) standards require all nursing students regardless of field to meet core proficiencies that are heavily weighted towards adult physical health care. While these skills are undoubtedly important, they often feel disconnected from the daily realities of mental health practice (Warrender, Ramsay, & Hurley, 2023). Student mental health nurses must demonstrate proficiency in tasks like catheterisation, wound care, and managing deteriorating physical conditions, which may be peripheral to their actual placements and career goals. This dissonance risks devaluing the distinctiveness of mental health nursing and contributes to a sense of professional invisibility (Warrender, 2024).

It sends a troubling message to student nurses: that their specialised training may not be considered essential, even as they contend with the ever-evolving complex mental health needs of the population.

Burnout among student nurses is not just an individual student issue, it is a symptom of a system in crisis. Mental health students are expected to perform complex emotional work, navigate ethical dilemmas, and meet standards that often feel misaligned with their chosen field. They do all of this while juggling financial strain, unpaid placements, and witnessing the burnout of the very professionals they aspire to become. If we are serious about safeguarding the future of the nursing workforce and the future of mental health care we must move beyond rhetoric and implement meaningful change. This means properly funding education, providing robust financial and emotional support for students, and critically re-evaluating regulatory standards that risk undermining field-specific expertise. Most of all, it means recognising that student nurses are not simply unpaid labour; they are already vital contributors to the health service, and they deserve to be treated as such. Without urgent action, we risk losing not only our students, but the heart of nursing itself.

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