What's the issue?

Loneliness is a wide-ranging topic that impacts all nursing staff regardless of geographical or clinical area. According to British Red Cross and the Co-op Group, over 9 million adults in the UK - across all age ranges – report feeling 'always or often lonely'.

The call to tackle loneliness is one which RCN members and the wider nursing profession have been raising for a number of years. This culminated in 2019, when RCN members mandated through our annual Congress process for the College to lobby UK governments on the issue and to work to improve the ability of nursing staff to recognise loneliness and its effects.

It is well evidenced that loneliness and social isolation can have severe negative health outcomes. Research has found that a lack of social connections can increase the likelihood of early death by 26% and it is reported that this is a risk comparable to smoking 15 cigarettes a day - higher than that caused by obesity and physical inactivity.[i]

Nurses are in a unique position in that they are in every community and location, caring for people from birth to death. Not only does this allows them to interact with people suffering from isolation, as members of one of the most trusted professions, people are often more inclined to seek support from nursing staff who can signpost patients to resources and help they might not have access to otherwise.

However, it is also important that nurses as a group are supported in their right, particularly as there is evidence of growing loneliness and isolation reported in the workplace. Much of this is undiagnosed, posing a serious risk to the wellbeing and productivity of the UK workforce.

Across the UK and across different health and care settings, there is a nursing workforce shortage. For our members this means that they are often working in stressful conditions with long hours which may be compounded by isolation and loneliness.

Loneliness at work is likely to affect social interaction, relationships and potentially clinical care as well as mental health.[ii] It is possible that those who are lonely at work are more vulnerable to workforce pressures such as stress, ill health and potentially vulnerable to adverse behaviours.[iii]

What's happening to tackle loneliness and isolation across the country?

The RCN is one of a growing number of organisations working to tackle loneliness and social isolation across the UK. This includes working with other Royal Medical Colleges, the British Red Cross, Government Departments, the NHS and Local Authorities.

The RCN is an active member of the Loneliness Action Group and supports the group's work in building research and policy reports on the issues of loneliness and isolation. The RCN has written to the Government on the issue as well as supporting the group's their lobbying efforts in the Westminster Parliament including adding our voice to call on the new Government (elected in December 2019) to continue to focus on this important issue.

The RCN has also published a hub on the issue of loneliness on our website with further information and links to resources.[iv]

On the national stage, in 2018, the UK Government launched a Loneliness Commission and appointed dedicated Minister for Loneliness to drive forward a programme of long-term planning, funding to connect patients to a variety of activities which aim to reduce demand on the NHS and improve patients' quality of life.

More recently, the UK Government announced a funding package to tackle loneliness during the Coronavirus pandemic and a 'Loneliness Network' to help connect groups at risk of isolation.[v]

The Scottish Government's first national strategy to tackle loneliness and isolation, A connected Scotland, was published in December 2018. The strategy includes examples of the important role nursing services can play in tackling loneliness and isolation. The RCN in Scotland responded to this consultation and the Minister for Mental

Health is keen to continue working with the College on this issue.

According to the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency [NISRA], in 2018-2019 approximately 1 in every 20 adults in Northern Ireland reported feeling lonely "always" or "often". The Department of Health is currently scoping existing policies and strategies to help identify how loneliness is being tackled. Within the Reform of Adult Social Care in Northern Ireland, work in progress includes proposals to develop a neighbourhood-based, preventative and citizen-focused community support model that promotes positive social well-being and connects people to supportive social networks and communities. A public consultation is anticipated this year.

The Welsh Government's national strategy, Taking Wales Forward, includes the commitment to develop a nationwide and cross-government strategy to address the issue of loneliness. It focuses on early intervention to prevent chronic loneliness, given its wider effects on health and wellbeing, and resulting pressure on the NHS and social care services.

What is the RCN calling for?

- Better awareness and work across the health and care sector to have resources and tools to help staff identify loneliness and signpost to local services

- Better awareness of workplace loneliness, particularly identification and support to those suffering from loneliness and isolation who work as health and care staff.

- Investment in further research into nursing's role in social prescribing

initiatives, as well as expansion of social prescribing services.

- Inclusion of loneliness outcomes measures into public health outcomes framework.

- Development and maintenance of a comprehensive range of community services and assets in order to address gaps in accessible provision to tackle loneliness

What can RCN members do?

- Highlight this issue by writing to your local MP or local decision makers (local authority, devolved governments)

- Use and promote the RCN loneliness resource to identify loneliness and social isolation experienced by patients or in their workplace[vi]

Further Resources

- RCN Loneliness Page https://www.rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/public-health/inclusion-health-care/loneliness

- Watch the debate at RCN Congress on this issue https://www.rcn.org.uk/congress/what-happened-at-congress-2019/21-loneliness#Watch

- *Campaign to End Loneliness* 'Loneliness a threat to health' webpage https://www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/threat-to-health/

- Loneliness Action Group (of which RCN is a member) webpage with research and reports on the topic https://www.redcross.org.uk/about-us/what-we-do/action-on-loneliness

[i] https://journals.plos.org/plosmedicine/article?id=10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316
[ii] https://www.rcn.org.uk/congress/what-happened-at-congress-2019/21-loneliness
[iii] https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4768542/

[iv] https://www.rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/public-health/inclusion-health-care/loneliness
[v] https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-launches-plan-to-tackle-loneliness-during-coronavirus-lockdown
[vi] https://www.rcn.org.uk/clinical-topics/public-health/inclusion-health-care/loneliness