

Resist graduate exploitation



Student officer **Dara Ann O'Malley** is urging all graduate nurses and midwives to boycott the new graduate recruitment programme

IN DECEMBER, the government announced that it was to recruit 1,000 newly qualified nurses/midwives on two-year contracts at just 80% of the first point of the staff nurse salary scale, which is €21,768. This equates to a 35% cut of €11,702 for graduates in just three years. When the pension levy, now automatically deducted at source, is added to this, the cut in their take home pay amounts to 40%.

Nursing and midwifery graduates who qualified in 2009 started on the second point of the salary scale of €33,470 (following 16 weeks of employment after the fourth-year internship placement). In 2011, the government imposed a 10% cut to new entrants to the public sector and reduced salaries to €28,539.

In February 2012, the Department of Health directed the management of hospitals to put newly qualified nurses/midwives on the first point of the salary scale: €27,211. The government's rationale for this reduced rate was to save money on agency expenditure. However, the HSE would have saved up to 54% a year by simply converting agency staff to direct employment, and by placing graduates on the agreed starting salary.

The government is now intent on imposing this new 80% rate, even though the new graduate, as a registered nurse/midwife, will carry the full duties and responsibilities of a registered and regulated health professional. These cuts are particularly unfair as newly qualified nurses/midwives are already among the lowest paid health service workers. This proposal also means they will be paid less than workers whom they are delegating to and who they will hold responsibility for.

Nurses and midwives work exclusively in the frontline, providing direct patient care, so this cut once again highlights the emptiness of the government's promise to protect frontline staff and services.

The INMO fully supports a graduate

placement programme that would provide all graduates with work, for up to two years, in the Irish health service, but an integral part of any such programme should be that graduates are paid at the current agreed rate for new entrants.

In December, the INMO held a press conference to condemn the introduction of this exploitative graduate programme. We highlighted that the HSE has sought to terminate the employment of hundreds of newly qualified nurses/midwives, who are currently employed on the proper salary, and to have them reapply for the same jobs on 80% of the pay scale.

The INMO also dispelled the notion that this graduate initiative involves the recruitment of 1,000 nurses/midwives, as suggested by the Department of Health and the HSE. There are no new or additional posts. This initiative represents the displacement of agency and temporary staff and their replacement, by new graduates, at a fraction of the proper scale.

Croke Park rally

Last month, the INMO held a graduate rally in Croke Park, which was attended by over 500 people. The rally saw speakers call for a rejection of the flawed graduate initiative and highlighting the fact that the proposed salary for new graduate was significantly less than graduates could earn in the UK, where salaries start at €33,000 in London, with excellent continuing educational opportunities.

Six recruitment agencies attended the rally seeking to recruit graduates for jobs in the private sector in Ireland and jobs internationally. Kate Cowhig, from Kate Cowhig International Healthcare Recruitment, stated that Irish nurses/midwives are hugely valued internationally for their high standard of training. Her agency has a number of vacancies available internationally for 2012 graduates.

At the rally, experienced nurses, currently working through an agency or on

short-term contracts, said that they had no other employment avenue because of the public sector recruitment embargo. Some of them have been on panels, awaiting a permanent post, for up to two years. They are now being faced with being 'sacked' to be replaced with underpaid graduates on 80% of the proper pay rate.

INMO campaign

Speakers at the rally urged graduates to be strong and hold fast to the boycott. The rally unanimously endorsed a nationwide lobbying campaign of all TDs to confront them with the facts about this low paid proposal, and the need for the Department of Health and HSE to agree to a proper graduate programme with the INMO.

A draft letter and contact details of all local TDs are available at www.inmo.ie. Please take five minutes to paste your local TD's name into the letter and email it to him/her. This will make a huge difference to the campaign.

In January, the job description of a graduate nurse was released by the HSE. The duties and responsibilities listed are completely the same as those of a staff nurse. Under the heading of 'education, training and development' in the job description, it outlines that the graduate nurse (general) will take responsibility for their own competency and learning, and development needs and actively contribute to the learning and development of the interdisciplinary team. No educational accreditation or training courses are specified in this programme.

On January 14, applications opened for the graduate jobs initiative. On January 17, the HSE extended the initiative to 2010/11 graduates and lengthened the application deadline to February 1. This is a clear indication that the 2012 graduates successfully boycotted the flawed scheme. The INMO is now appealing to the 2010/11 graduates to maintain the boycott. Through solidarity we will be successful in our campaign.