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When the Nurse Lifeline charity was disbanded earlier this year, nurses lost an important service, say Dan Butcher and Helen Cowan from Oxford Brookes University.

Prior to resigning as the RCN general secretary and chief executive last year, Pat Cullen spoke of her concerns over the failure to retain experienced nursing staff. She said: ‘Thousands of nurses are leaving the profession early citing burnout, physical or mental health, and concerns about the quality of people’s care’.[1]

Lack of colleague support, and experience of bullying, harassment and discrimination, are also often named as reasons for leaving nursing.[2]

In a blog as RCN Mental Health Forum chair Ellie Gordon celebrated the increased openness of nursing staff when talking about their own mental health.

‘There’s still a stigma attached to admitting you’re struggling, so we need to create workplaces and spaces where colleagues feel supported,’ she wrote, focusing particularly on listening services where feelings and concerns can be acknowledged, such as identifying workplace stressors, giving information or signposting to helpful resources.[3]

Nurse Lifeline received thousands of calls

Nurse Lifeline was a registered charity set up to listen to nurses and care workers, to reduce isolation and help staff feel more connected to a community that shares struggles and triumphs.

Led by nurses and midwives, the peer lifeline was in its own words ‘all about creating community’, about being ‘here together’. Registered and recently retired healthcare professionals listened with empathy and shared experiences.

From its inception in 2021, Nurse Lifeline received 2,391 calls from care staff in need, including 396 calls from nurses, 20 calls from nursing students and 103 calls from healthcare assistants.

In the immediate post-pandemic phase, volunteer call handlers heard from colleagues trying to make sense of the care they had provided, the limitations on what they could do and debrief with a stranger in a confidential space.

Many conversations of this type gave nurses, midwives, students and other health care professionals the opportunity to speak with someone who 'gets it'.

Gradually, call handlers noticed a shift with an increasing number of calls coming from staff engaged in Fitness to Practise (FtP) processes, seeking advice or a chance to talk about their experiences. In all cases, call handlers listened non-judgmentally and with empathy, caring for those who care.

Worryingly, many of the callers were whistleblowers, who then found themselves subject to investigation by the NMC. Claims have been made that the Fitness to Practice process has increasingly been 'weaponised', contributing to escalating levels of poor mental health and increased risk of suicide.[4]

While the recently appointed NMC interim chief executive and registrar, Paul Rees MBE, has stated his desire to create FtP processes that are 'faster, fairer and more effective for professionals',[5] the organisation also needs to ensure mechanisms exist to support nurses and their mental health.

Closure of the charity

Sadly, on 31 January of this year, Nurse Lifeline was forced to close due to insufficient funding. A charity committed to caring for those who care was unable to find the necessary support from nursing organisations and nurse leaders to enable it to continue its work.

As a past Nurse Lifeline call handler since January 2022, Dan says: 'My role at Nurse Lifeline has been one of the proudest contributions to nursing that I have made, and I am disappointed that a necessary service to our profession has had to close.'

We know that nurses, more than many other healthcare professions, are not always good at looking after themselves but we must raise this as a priority if we are to retain the nurses currently working under extreme pressures and recruit dynamic new nurses for the future.

If we do not take the mental health challenges faced by nurses seriously and more actively look after each other, the implications for our profession are worrying.

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- *If you need to speak with someone, you can call the* Samaritans, night or day on 116 123 or use the SHOUT text service (85258) *[2]. NMC Watch supports nurses and midwives experiencing the Fitness to Practice process and can be contacted at* www.nmcwatch.org.uk/contact/ *[3]*

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