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STEVE FORD, EDITOR

PUBLIC HEALTH

'Harrowing': School nurses warn of children stealing food to feed families

09 MARCH, 2023 | BY ELLA DEVEREUX



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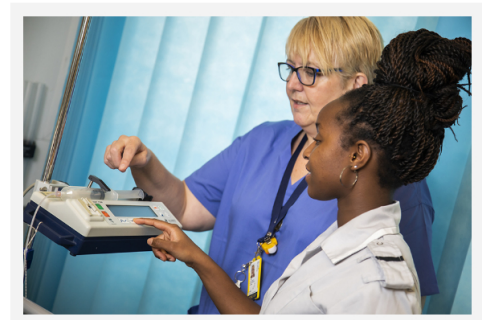
School nurses have been left "emotionally distressed" after witnessing children taking food out of bins to feed their families and stealing clothes from their peers to keep warm.

The chief executive of the School and Public Health Nurses Association (SAPHNA), Sharon White, told *Nursing Times* that these "harrowing" cases were becoming more common in schools amid the ongoing cost-of-living crisis.

To mark International School Meals Day 2023, Ms White reiterated SAPHNA's calls for the government to invest in free school meals for children, warning that there were "less and less



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options available" for school nurses to support students in need.

SAPHNA has heard from an increasing number of school nurses who are worried about the lengths that children and parents are going to in order to access basic things like food and hot water.

"Children will not attend, achieve and attain in school if they are starving"

Sharon White

One school nurse warned SAPHNA about a teenager who was excluded from school for sifting through the bins and taking excess food home to his parents.

Ms White said: "I spoke to the head teacher, and she said she'd had a whole spate of children trying to steal from the bins [or] from

the school kitchen because all the families were starving."

She added that in some cases, children had been "scaling dangerous fencing" to try and access food which had been thrown away "to take home and feed their families".

Ms White said: "When I spoke to the head teacher and the pastoral leader they too were as emotionally distressed as we were about what is happening."

Another school nurse warned SAPHNA that some parents had been relying on the school for hot water.

Ms White described how one parent would bring in empty hot water bottles and flasks at the end of each day to get hot water from the school "so that he could provide some warmth for his children and make pot noodles".

Meanwhile, SAPHNA has also been told by school nurses that children and young people had been stealing each other's clothes, such as winter coats and shoes, because parents could not afford to buy them.

Ms White explained that while school nurses had a role in supporting children and young people, in some of these situations "there isn't anything [they] can do".

She also warned that school nurses had become "much less visible to children" as the number of staff in the specialism had decreased in recent years.

"By the time children have been pointed out to us, or get access to us, they're normally in crisis," Ms White said.

"Whereas before, when we were visible, accessible and regularly visiting schools, teachers or the kids would tell us earlier so we could intervene earlier and try and help," she added.

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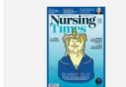
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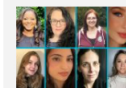
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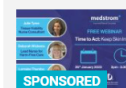


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In addition, Ms White explained that school nurses themselves were “struggling with the cost-of-living crisis”.

She said: “In years gone by, teachers and the children’s workforce would taken breakfast into school [for pupils].

“School nurses would take bowls of fruit in and healthy options and snacks to demonstrate and give out.

“But now we’ve got food kitchens and donation boxes in clinics for qualified nurses who can’t make ends meet because their salaries are not rising – it’s really concerning.”

Last month, SAPHNA joined a cross-party group of MPs, children’s charities and food campaigners in calling for the prime minister Rishi Sunak to offer free school meals to all families receiving universal credit.



Sharon White

In a letter, published on 1 February, the UK’s public health leaders urged Mr Sunak to scrap the cap which stops children from households with an income of more than £7,400 a year from getting free school meals.

The letter said: “In October 2022, there were an estimated 800,000 children living in poverty who did not have access to free school meals – this is unacceptable.”

The letter also noted that children who eat nutritious school lunches “develop and learn better than those who don’t”.

It added: “Providing a child with access to free school meals reduces the risk and impact of food insecurity on that child and on their family.

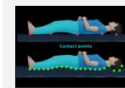
“It is imperative that the government acts now to give children in all families eligible for universal credit access to free school meals.”

Ms White echoed these calls, describing to *Nursing Times* how health promotion and prevention “is far better than cure”.

She said: “Children will not attend, achieve and attain in school if they are starving.

“The impact of this will go on for a very long time, there’s very clear evidence of the impact on poverty on children.”

A Department for Education spokesperson said: “Since 2010 the number of children receiving a free meal at school has increased by more than two million, thanks to the introduction of universal infant free school meals plus generous protections put in place as benefit recipients move across to universal credit”



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Over a third of pupils in England now received free school meals in education settings, compared with one in six in 2010, they said.

They added that the department would continue to keep all free school meal eligibility under review, "to ensure that these meals are supporting those who most need them".

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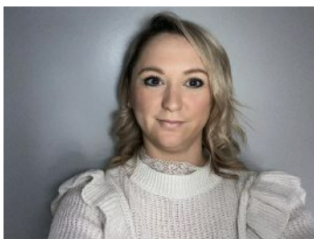
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