Looked after children’s mental health needs are being ignored

By Linsey Wynton

The care system is neglecting the mental health needs of children and teenagers, says a government report.

The House of Commons education committee found that many health services and local authorities are failing to identify children’s mental health needs when they enter care.

Its report, Mental Health and Wellbeing of Looked-after Children, published last week, calls for looked-after children to be given priority access to specialist mental health assessments with subsequent treatment based on their clinical needs.

The committee found that methods used to assess children and young people’s mental health and wellbeing as they enter care are inconsistent. Initial assessments are rarely completed by qualified mental health professionals. It also found that Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) are turning away children because they do not meet high treatment thresholds.

And children are being rejected – against statutory guidance – because they have moved placement, even when the move is within the same local authority.

Looked after children are four times more likely than other children to have a mental health condition, and almost half of children in care have a diagnosable mental health disorder.

The RCN was among 58 organisations that submitted written evidence to the committee during the process. It expressed concern about ‘a postcode lottery in respect of dedicated CAMHS for looked-after children’ and cited a 7% drop in mental health nursing staff since 2010 in the face of increasing demand for the service.

RCN professional lead for children and young people’s nursing Fiona Smith said: ‘Too many children are not getting the help they need and the longer they have to wait, the more likely their conditions will continue into adulthood.’

Education committee chair Neil Carmichael said: ‘Given children in care may have unstable family lives and are frequently changing their residential placement, such inflexibility puts them at a serious disadvantage in getting the support they deserve. This must change.’

Young people leaving care in the UK are five times more likely to attempt suicide than their peers. They are also more likely to enter the criminal justice system.

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Early warning system detects catheter-related urinary infections

Researchers have developed an early warning system for infections associated with urinary catheters.

It is hoped that the system, which turns urine bright yellow when an infection is detected, will mean that treatment can be commenced before infection causes long-term damage.

The University of Bath team who created the system say it could reduce the use of antibiotics in patients who have a urinary catheter. The research is published in Biosensors and Bioelectronics.

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