Staff shortage puts neonatal services under strain

*Report by charity Bliss claims that there are too few nurses working in 64% of units*

By Nick Triggle

A ‘SEVERE shortage’ of neonatal nurses and doctors in England is leaving services ‘over-stretched and under incredible pressure’, a survey suggests.

The research by charity Bliss found that 64% of neonatal units did not have enough nurses, with the problem being worst in intensive care units.

Bliss said this suggested there was a national shortage of 2,140 nurses to care for premature and sick babies – nearly double the number in 2010 when the charity last carried out the survey.

It also highlighted a shortage of specialist nurses with two thirds of units failing to achieve the target of ensuring 70% of staff employed have an accredited neonatal qualification.

Overall, two thirds of units did not have enough doctors, while four in ten did not provide parents with access to a trained mental health worker.

The study was compiled from the responses of 101 neonatal units, or two thirds of the total in England, and all 14 neonatal transport units.

The charity blamed lack of funding and the huge demands being put on services, with bed-occupancy rates being consistently above the recommend 80% average in most units. Ensuring nurses received the correct training was also identified as a problem in a number of trusts.

Wake-up call

Many of the standards for neonatal care were set out by the Department of Health’s toolkit for high-quality neonatal services in 2009. The standards and the percentages of units meeting them are set out in the panel, right.

Bliss chief executive Caroline Davey said the findings needed to act as a ‘wake-up call’. The current pressures on the system meant that the NHS was ‘falling further behind’, she added.

Neonatal Nurses Association chair Denise Evans said: ‘This comes as no surprise. We find it hard to recruit to this area of nursing. Because there are so many jobs available, people have choice and the pressure in neonatal units is a real factor.’

RCN professional lead for children and young people’s nursing Fiona Smith said the problems were so severe that the care of babies could be ‘jeopardised’.

An NHS England spokesperson said it will consider the findings and is planning to review neonatal services. But he added: ‘Despite increasing demand, studies consistently show standards are on a par with other European countries.’

New ‘passport’ will improve mental health care journey

A PASSPORT-STYLE brief of key facts that children and young people using mental health services can use to help them avoid repeating their history and preferences has been launched by NHS England.

The passport, which includes clinical information, medical history and key personal preferences, is written with the practitioner and can include as much or as little as the young person likes.

It is kept in their preferred format such as a letter, in the form of a passport or even on their phone, and can be shown to professionals at any new service.

More details at tinyurl.com/pjk3aza

Staffing standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Service</th>
<th>Staff-to-baby ratio</th>
<th>Percentage of units meeting standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Special care</td>
<td>1:4 at all times</td>
<td>67%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High dependency care</td>
<td>1:2 at all times</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intensive care</td>
<td>1:1 at all times</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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Beware of burns

SPECIALIST BURNS nurses put on fancy dress to highlight to children the risks associated with Halloween, bonfire night and Diwali, the Hindu festival of light.

An estimated 110 burn injuries are treated each day in UK emergency departments, with cases at their highest in October and November.

Leicester General Hospital’s burns and plastic surgery nursing team emphasised the dangers of candles near fancy dress costumes and offered first aid advice for treating burns.

Clare Porter, specialist nurse for burns and plastic surgery, said: ‘Most burns are preventable but accidents happen. The most at-risk group are under fives with candles and hot drinks.’