Money follows the stars

NHS trusts have been graded against new, hotel-style star ratings in another effort to improve standards. The ratings cover areas such as waiting lists and times, hospital cleanliness and financial performance. Chief executives of badly-performing trusts may lose their jobs unless improvements are not made within set timescales. The best performing trusts will be given more control over spending, undergo fewer inspections and have the opportunity directly to advise the government on NHS policy.

Health secretary Alan Milburn said: ‘As every patient knows there is too much variation in performance between England’s hospitals. That is not primarily about money. It is about management and organisation.’ He said that the ratings did not mean ‘that a poorly performing hospital has low standards, is unsafe or does not contain some very good clinical services’. ‘Staff are often doing a good job but the assessments show that organisational performance does need to improve,’ he said.

Trusts with the highest rating – three stars – include Addenbrooke’s, South Tyneside Health Care and Norfolk & Norwich Health Care. Brighton Health Care, Stoke Mandeville Hospital and the Oxford Radcliffe Hospital were among those that received no stars.

The government has also announced that ten of the best performing trusts are to pilot performance pay related to the star ratings. The team bonus schemes, payable if staff achieve self-imposed targets over and above their normal workload, include one-off cash payments and improvement funds for staff which may be used for training or new facilities to improve the working environment. The government is providing £3.5 million to fund the pilots.

The Institute for Healthcare Management, at whose annual conference the team bonus pilots were announced, has criticised the star rating scheme.

RCN call to ‘Value Nurses’ in Scotland

Nurses and midwives in Scotland are pressing the Scottish Executive to fund in full return to practice courses. The calls have come in support of an RCN Scotland campaign ‘Value Nurses’.

Support for the campaign has come from MSPs from all parties. Liberal Democrat MSP Margaret Smith called for the Executive to follow Alan Milburn’s lead for funding return to practice courses. ‘Nurses have to pay £1,000 if they want to come back into the NHS in Scotland,’ she said, ‘and that’s before other expenses such as travel costs and child care are added on.’ She added that there are an estimated 10,000 nurses in Scotland currently not practising.

Nicola Sturgeon, SNP health spokesperson, said: ‘The nursing profession is facing a crisis in morale as well as recruitment.’ She highlighted the plight of nursing students accumulating thousands of pounds of debt during their courses. ‘We need practical policies to attract more young people,’ she said. Further increases to the student bursary, on top of the 10.4 per cent announced earlier this year, are needed, she said.

Malcolm Chisholm, deputy health minister, said the Executive would give ‘serious consideration’ to calls to fund return to practice courses. ‘This will be just one of the issues that will be raised at the nursing convention on recruitment and retention next month,’ he said. Mr Chisholm added that the convention will not be a ‘one-off meeting’.

In brief

- As of August, 124 new nurse, midwife and health visitor consultant posts have been approved this year. Health minister John Hutton said: ‘Approving these additional posts represents a further step in our plans to liberate the talents of frontline staff.’ The target is 1,000 nurse consultant posts by 2004. The deadline for the next round of applications for post approval is December this year. Applications should be submitted to the Department of Health.

- More than one-third of directors of nursing do not expect to receive a pay award in 2001/02, according to the findings of a Pay & Workforce Research/Employing Nurses & Midwives survey. Others are unsure whether they will receive a pay award in line with other staff. In the fourth annual survey of its kind, those directors of nursing who did expect to receive an award predicted the rise would be between 3 and 4 per cent.

- Older people staying in nursing homes in England now have bills for their nursing care paid by the government. Health minister Jacqui Smith said: ‘Free nursing care for all meets our NHS Plan commitment. We are moving away from the means test to a system determined by assessed need.’ Other changes made to the system of residential care charges include the opportunity to defer accommodation payments to avoid older people having to sell their own homes.

- Rotational shift patterns can damage the health of workers, according to a study by researchers from the University of Surrey reported in the Lancet. The researchers call for greater regulation of practices carried out in the early hours of the morning.

- Nurses and doctors are now able to take advantage of the government’s £230 million housing aid package. The Starter Homes initiative is available to staff in areas such as the South East of England where property prices prevent may staff getting on the property ladder. It is hoped that the scheme will help to reduce shortages in these areas.