Barnet community health council has decided against announcing a vote of no confidence in Barnet health authority following the appointment of a new chair who has promised full consultation on proposed service cuts. But the CHC awaits a judicial review on the health authority's decision to cut spending by £7 million over the next three years.

RCN general secretary Christine Hancock has urged managers to be honest with nurses about job cuts resulting from trust mergers. Speaking at an Institute of Health Services Management conference in London this week, Miss Hancock said mergers should not go ahead at the expense of quality or staff morale.

Health secretary Frank Dobson is considering national implementation of an experimental flexible rostering system. NHS officials are studying Timecare - a Swedish computer system which allows nurses to ‘bank’ hours worked and book time off. An RCN spokesperson said the scheme was one element in easing the recruitment crisis.

An RAF nurse has won an industrial tribunal claim of sex discrimination against the MoD after he was turned down for a practice nurse post in favour of a female applicant with no primary healthcare qualifications. The tribunal awarded Gordon Main, who was backed by the RCN, undisclosed compensation.

**Equal pay hopes grow**

NURSES CAN legitimately compare their pay with others who work in the NHS, according to the QC who won a landmark case. The advice published last week by Lord Lester for the MSF, the parent organisation of the Community Practitioners' and Health Visitors' Association, will add weight to thousands of equal pay cases being prepared by health unions.

The right to equal pay for equal work without sex discrimination is already guaranteed under a European treaty. But Lord Lester, who successfully led the first equal pay claim comparing different NHS professions, has said nurses could compare their pay with fellow workers throughout the service.

Roger Kline, head of labour relations at the CPHVA, said: 'The implications of this are radical...we don't think any equal pay lawyers disagree with this.'

Meanwhile, hundreds of nurses are bringing equal pay claims in a sex discrimination battle in Carlisle, which could see a D grade nurse's pay increase by almost £6,000 a year.

**NI secretary thanks mental health nurses**

NORTHERN IRELAND secretary Mo Mowlam paid tribute last week to the way in which the province's mental health nurses have responded to the psychological needs of local people during the past 30 years.

Speaking to over 200 mental health nurses at the RCN's third European mental health nursing conference in Belfast, Dr Mowlam thanked nurses and their healthcare colleagues for helping to 'heal the wounds' of a 'splintered society'.

Describing her efforts to wean local people away from expectations that the state could solve automatically the province's problems, Dr Mowlam said 'top down' thinking had to be challenged by healthcare reformers and politicians alike.

The conference also heard that most nursing students have taken illicit drugs, according to the results of a survey by Eilish Adams, a tutor-lecturer at Surrey University.

Ms Adams' survey was conducted among 170 nursing students, who completed the questionnaires anonymously. The most commonly used drug was cannabis, with 53 per cent of respondents admitting to having smoked the drug.

Ms Adams said 'relaxed' attitudes to substance misuse among nursing students could undermine health promotion programmes. 'Substance misuse cannot be separated from other areas of care. If nurses see nothing wrong in misusing such substances themselves, they may neglect to address these issues in patients with physical illnesses which can be affected by drug use,' Ms Adams said.

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**Anger over recruitment**

A TRUST manager provoked outrage among nurses after admitting care standards were falling but there was nothing he could do.

Dick Bishop, chief executive of Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust, said faced with a choice between closing wards and recruiting nurses, he had no choice but to keep beds open.

Mike Hayward, chair of RCN Portsmouth branch, said the RCN was seeking urgent meetings with trust board members.