Unions back decision to keep Ashworth open

By Ian McMillan

NURSING UNIONS have joined nurses at the beleaguered Ashworth Hospital on Merseyside in welcoming the government's decision to reject calls for the high security unit to be closed.

The calls for the hospital's closure came from an inquiry panel led by Peter Fallon QC, whose report on allegations surrounding the hospital's personality disorders unit (PDU) was published last week.

Despite admitting the report had highlighted a 'shameful history of confusion, mismanagement and incompetence', health secretary Frank Dobson refused to close the hospital. He said security had improved and the PDU's 'scale, role and organisation' might be changed.

The inquiry panel was set up in 1997 to examine claims that patients in the unit had been involved in paedophile activity, and that drugs, alcohol and pornographic videos had been widely circulated.

The report substantiates many of the claims and concludes that Ashworth Hospital has been so blighted by a 'negative, defensive and blame-ridden culture' that closure is the only option.

Inquiry panel member and RMN Granville Daniels said the hospital's senior managers had become side-tracked into responding to crises and conducting investigations into 'untoward incidents'.

'We feel they never got hold of clinical issues and the problems facing staff on a day-to-day basis.'

The RCN would not commit itself on the question of the hospital's future, but local branch secretary Len Jones told Nursing Standard: 'The RCN at Ashworth totally disagrees with the suggestion that the hospital should close. The quality of the nursing staff here is superb and we want to put things right.'

Unison professional officer Paul Chapman claimed that relocating Ashworth's patients with personality disorders into prisons would create more problems.

'Closure of the whole hospital is ill-advised. It would involve a huge loss of expertise,' he said.

The Prison Officers Association and the Prison Officers Association of EN James Corrigan, who was dismissed for 'gross misconduct'.