The NHS Confederation's annual conference last week heard calls for nurses to be more involved at senior levels

NHS management believes self-regulation fails patients

By Heather Stephen

MANY NHS bosses believe professional self-regulation has failed to protect patients from dangerous clinical practice.

More than half the managers attending the NHS Confederation’s annual conference in Harrogate last week backed a motion claiming self-regulation had ‘failed to deliver patient safety’, although 41 per cent disagreed.

And 80 per cent of the managers called for the public to be made aware of poor performance by individual clinicians.

NHS Confederation chief executive Stephen Thornton said that he was not surprised by the votes. ‘We need a combination of strong organisational mechanisms in each trust to assure quality and much better professional self-regulation than we have had in the past,’ he said.

A conference debate heard how many managers believed the principle of self-regulation had been undermined by recent clinical scandals, such as that involving paediatric heart surgery at Bristol Royal Infirmary.

Among them was Keith Jones of Doncaster Health Authority, who argued: ‘Self-regulation offers a great deal of scope for self-preservation — there should always be some outside involvement so we can be assured there is no cover up.’

But NHS Confederation chair Catherine McLoughlin, a nurse and a member of the UKCC, said employers did not understand self-regulation and therefore believed it has failed. She said the UKCC and the doctors’ equivalent, the General Medical Council, were attempting to clear up this misunderstanding.

‘Self-regulation is still critical but we need more dialogue and openness,’ she said.

Nurses had a headstart on self-audit through PREP, she added. ‘We need self-regulation. Professionals have to take responsibility for their own conduct and if we engage with management, there should be no need for a heavy-handed outside approach.’

Public health posts will be open to nurses

NURSES COULD soon have the chance to apply for doctor-style posts in public health.

Public health minister Tessa Jowell announced the creation of a generic public health specialist crossing all professional boundaries.

She said applicants need not come from medicine and that the posts would ‘reflect the multidisciplinary nature of public health’.

Details about the posts will come in the forthcoming white paper on public health. It is not yet known how many posts will be created and pay is yet to be decided, but Ms Jowell said work was going ahead on accreditation and training.

She told the conference: ‘The workforce is multidisciplinary by nature, which has not been recognised sufficiently in the past.

‘That is why we will be bringing forward proposals for a new role for specialists in public health in the forthcoming white paper.’

Ms Jowell later added at a press conference that the role would be open to professionals already engaged in protecting the public health — and that will include nurses.

Nurse Nelwyn Watson-Druce, a non-executive director of the Community Health South London NHS Trust, welcomed Ms Jowell’s ‘vision, passion and understanding’ of complex relationships in the health service.

But she pointed out: ‘We have to look at access to health. Black children are being excluded from the NHS at the moment.’

Ms Jowell said she shared concerns about health inequalities and that the government was working hard to address this problem.

In brief

Elizabeth Powell, one of only two nurses to chair a primary care group, called on health authorities to support the development of PCGs.

Ms Powell, practice nurse and chair of the St Helens North PCG on Merseyside, spoke in support of health minister John Denham, who said: ‘Some PCGs are not receiving the high quality personal and organisational development support others are receiving.’

A committee appointed by the government will call for nurses to be more involved in health service decision-making. The call will be a central theme of a report from the NHS taskforce on staff involvement, to be published in July.

Taskforce member Helen Bailey, a clinical support nurse at Rochdale Healthcare NHS Trust, said: ‘Staff have told us that being involved has had a huge impact on job satisfaction and it will have the biggest effect on outcomes.’

NHS managers should work towards encouraging people to self-treat and use primary care services to avoid a crisis in the acute sector over the millennium holiday period, the conference heard. Andrew Cash, chief executive of the Northern General Hospital, Sheffield, said: ‘We need to stop people bouncing into the secondary care system.’

Efficiency savings have hit NHS trusts’ ability to deliver the government’s health agenda and will lead to cuts in services.

NHS Confederation chief executive Stephen Thornton warned in his conference address: ‘Decades of ruthless, year-on-year salami-slicing efficiency drives have stripped the system of its flexibility and eaten into service quality,’ he said. Mr Thornton called on ministers to release all available funds as soon as possible and postpone any further changes until next year to allow trusts to plan for the millennium holiday.