Ring of confidence

Research showing a telephone consultation service run by nurses is safe and effective may herald a revolution in health care in the United Kingdom

By Oona Mashta

THE NUMBER of nurse telephone consultation services is likely to expand dramatically over the next few years. That is the prediction of many health professionals, one now supported by the hugely positive results of the first scientific study into nurse telephone services similar to NHS Direct.

The study findings, published in this week’s British Medical Journal, confirm that nurses can improve patient access to out-of-hours care and manage around half the total number of inquiries over the phone.

The three-year randomised control trial compared a normal service run by GPs with a nurse telephone consultation service integrated with a GP co-op.

Researchers from the University of Southampton, funded by BT and supported by the RCN, looked at a GP service, the South Wiltshire Out of Hours Project. Its telephone service was found to have cut the number of visits patients had to make to surgeries by nearly two fifths. And there were fewer emergency hospital admissions where the nurse service was used with no increase in deaths, proving it was safe and effective for patients.

The nurse service enabled GPs to attend urgent cases, halving their workload overall. Most callers, patients and GPs were very satisfied with the service, which was developed into a full-time scheme after a trial period. The nurses who took part were experienced and specially trained to receive, assess and manage calls from patients or their carers. Management options included telephone advice, referral to the GP on duty (for telephone advice, an appointment at a primary care centre, or a home visit), referral to the emergency service or advice to attend A&E.

Calls were managed with the support of computer software designed to help the nurses reach their decisions on how to manage patients with particular medical problems.

As a result of the positive findings (see box), the RCN will launch the first guidance for telephone nurses next month. It has been developed by a group, including two of the University of Southampton researchers and a member of the Department of Health. Its aim is to promote best practice in the field of nurse telephone consultation.

The Department of Health’s NHS Direct is currently piloting 16 different nurse telephone consultation models, some as stand-alone services not attached to primary care. Val Lattimer, co-author of the study, called for all NHS Direct services to be integrated into primary care.

She said: ‘It is important that nurse telephone consultation services are rooted in primary care. There are many strengths in integrating with GP services – nurses will be more familiar with local referral systems so they will be able to get patients better, easier access to health care.’

Meanwhile, research team leader Steve George suggested closer links between the telephone services and social services could be developed. He said: ‘A large proportion of calls to out-of-hours services can be handled with advice alone. There are clear arguments therefore in favour of centralising the process of handling calls. We believe the success of NHS Direct will depend on the extent to which it can integrate with primary care and social services and enable direct access to our out-of-hours primary care services.’

But he said: ‘The main concern people have had with nurse telephone consultation is the risk of “missed cases”. Our study demonstrates this concern is unfounded.’