Health secretary told that many of the hospitals he advocates are being closed

Nurse-led elderly care wards to free acute beds

By Nick Lipley

HOSPITAL WARDS run by consultant nurses providing ‘intermediate’ care for older patients are to be established to free up acute beds.

Health secretary Alan Milburn outlined the plans last week in a speech at the King’s Fund in London as part a drive to ease the pressures experienced over recent weeks by hospitals across the UK.

As well as establishing low-dependency wards, Mr Milburn wants to see more elderly care in ‘rejuvenated and modernised’ community or cottage hospitals and, with better technology, at home.

He said: ‘There will be a variety of intermediate care. Some services will be in specially designated wards run by consultant nurses. Some will be community facilities, perhaps giving new life to cottage hospitals. Some will be improved care services in the home itself.’

Mr Milburn, who referred to consultant nurses as ‘modern matrons’, said he expected to see the first designated hospital wards in place early next year.

But he balked at suggestions that nursing homes could also act as ‘a bridge between home and hospital’, claiming that too often they created a ‘dependency culture’.

Despite stressing that nursing homes were suitable for some older patients, he added: ‘Let’s not reinvent the failures of the past.’

He also denied that the development of community or cottage hospitals meant a return to the ‘passive’ care once provided in convalescent homes.

He said the experience this winter of acute services, and the findings of the government’s National Beds Inquiry, had highlighted how many older people required intermediate care.

Mr Milburn also admitted the shortage of nurses ‘has become glaringly obvious’.

But RCN general secretary Christine Hancock told Mr Milburn that many of the hospitals he now backed are being closed.

Speaking later, she added: ‘The challenge now is to achieve improvements quickly in a health service that is under severe pressure.

‘We must build on what we already have – excellent community hospitals faced with closure for financial reasons and nursing homes that want to provide much more than the basics.’

Chief executive of the Registered Nursing Home Association, Frank Ursell, said: ‘We have the qualified nursing staff and facilities to provide right now the high quality intermediate care the health secretary is looking for.’

The health secretary also confirmed a White Paper on elderly care will be published this autumn.

Consultant nurses are no ‘modern matrons’

HEALTH SECRETARY Alan Milburn’s reference to consultant nurses as ‘modern matrons’ has been criticised by the RCN for misrepresenting the profession.

Announcing plans to establish ‘intermediate’ elderly care wards to be run by consultant nurses, Mr Milburn said: ‘I like to see these consultant nurses as modern matrons, co-ordinating services for elderly people.’

But his comments, which come less than two months before the first 141 consultant nurses start work, have prompted concern that the term ‘modern matron’ is misleading and damaging to the profession’s image at a time when new recruits are needed desperately.

RCN consultant nurse project manager Kim Manley said: ‘It does not do nursing much of a service.

‘In the public’s eye, matrons could be seen in a positive light in as much as they get things done, but on the other hand they could be seen very much as having a terrorising image.’

The RCN also sees the health secretary’s suggested role for consultant nurses as misguided as it appears to deny nurses the chance to progress their careers without entering management.

Ministers admit bed shortage

THE LONG-AWAITED findings of the government’s National Beds Inquiry have forced ministers to accept there is a national shortage of hospital beds.

Announcing preliminary findings last week, health secretary Alan Milburn said: ‘The trend of the last decade or more of reductions in hospital beds can’t keep pace with the changing demography, additional activity and the new services that we envisage for the NHS.’

He said that the health service needed ‘an increase in the number of beds in the whole system’.

The full findings of the inquiry, commissioned by the previous health secretary, Frank Dobson, are due to be published this month.

According to Mr Milburn, the inquiry will show that a rethink of elderly care is needed. It also reveals ‘wide variation in hospital bed usage between health authorities’, he said.

The inquiry has found that:
- Two thirds of hospital beds are occupied by people aged 65 or over.
- Half the increase in emergency admissions since the mid-1990s involved people aged 75 or over.
- Half the emergency admissions of the over-75s since the early 1990s were for ‘frailty and infirmity’.

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