Nurses to advise on consent forms

NEW FORMS to be used when requesting consent for organ retention or donation are to be drawn up with the help of nurses, the health department announced last week.

The decision follows the publication of two reports on the illegal and unethical retention of more than 100,000 organs, stillbirths and fetuses across England.

Announcing plans for new legislation, possibly this side of a general election, health secretary Alan Milburn said: 'The current law and post-mortem consent forms are ambiguous. They talk of taking tissue when in fact they often mean taking organs. They record “lack of objection” rather than positive consent.'

Nurses are also set to take part in a summit this month to address government concerns over the scandal's effect on organ donation rates.

Although one of the reports and the national media largely focused on events at Alder Hey Hospital in Liverpool, Mr Milburn said it was clear organ retention without relatives' full knowledge and agreement was widespread. 'The law will be changed to enshrine the concept of informed consent. The law has ill-served bereaved parents in our country. It causes confusion for staff. It must now be changed.'

The other report, by chief medical officer for England Liam Donaldson, found that many forms, including a 'standard' one used by more than two thirds of the 196 NHS trusts with pathology services, had 'serious weaknesses'. It is unclear when the 'standard' form was drawn up but even the newer ones perpetuated some of the flaws, his report found.

Professor Donaldson told Nursing Standard: 'Nursing staff are often the people who are there at the time of death. They are the ones people turn to for support. We will need to listen to their views carefully when drawing up new forms.'

One model has been proposed in the Redfern report into the events at Alder Hey. Despite its nine sections and scores of questions to be posed by professionals, it is considered practical by the RCN. But the college said easily intelligible leaflets must be available before relatives are asked to sign.

RCN paediatric nurse adviser Sue Burr said: 'We need them in language that patients or relatives can understand. We need short sentences and simple language because people are very distressed at that time.' She also suggested that different consent forms should be used for perinatal, child and adult deaths.

Alder Hey staff bear brunt of bad press

STAFF AT Alder Hey Hospital in Liverpool were coming to terms with the impact of the organ retention scandal last week.

RCN north west regional director Ian Hargreaves said: 'Alder Hey is getting a bad name and a bad press, but a lot of good work has been done there. The nurses are getting the flak for what pathologists have done in the past.'

Unison said morale had plummeted and that it must now be restored.

Four senior staff members at the hospital, including the chief executive, were suspended last week, and the roles of other staff are to be examined.

The trust that runs the hospital apologised for the distress caused.

MPs pledge more grief support

MINISTERS HAVE announced plans to boost the number of bereavement advisers in the wake of the organ retention scandal.

The move is part of a five-point plan to give relatives greater say in how the organs and tissues of their loved ones are used.

According to government figures, 53 per cent of trusts have bereavement advisers and most of those in post are nurses.

Speaking last week, health secretary Alan Milburn said: 'We need to beef that up and make sure they are available in all hospitals.'

He acknowledged that extra training would be needed, but a health department spokesperson admitted that no extra funding had been earmarked 'as yet'. She said nurses' 'communication skills, compassion and ability to empathise' made them ideal for this role.

RCN paediatric nurse adviser Sue Burr said: 'If you have a background in nursing, you are used to co-ordinating things. ‘The fact that you know the systems families have been through helps them feel they have much more support.’

Nurses at smaller hospitals may want to develop referral networks with full-time bereavement advisers at larger sites, she suggested.

Callers turn to nurse-led helpline for advice over relatives' organs

EXTRA NHS Direct nurses were drafted in last week as members of the public tried to establish the fate of their relatives.

The service saw a 50 per cent rise in calls in the 14-hour period after the publication of two reports on how thousands of organs came to be retained across England.

NHS Direct staff handled 3,000 more calls than usual from concerned members of the public.

NHS Direct clinical lead Jill Stringer said: 'Extra staff were drafted in to cope with the increase in calls and any subsequent pressures on the service. Staff have handled these calls in a professional and empathetic manner and we hope they have contributed in a positive way to help patients deal with this difficult issue.'

Many calls were directed to the national child death helpline, set up by Great Ormond Street Hospital for Children NHS Trust in London.