Integrated out-of-hours services remain patchy
Callers to out-of-hours GP services are supposed to be put through automatically to NHS Direct, but many face delays or have to wait to be called back by a nurse.
A study of 31 GP co-operatives in England and their NHS Direct partners showed that while more than two thirds had integrated all out-of-hours calls, fewer than one-third achieved single call access for all patients.
Most patients still needed to make at least two calls to contact NHS Direct and then had to wait for a return call, University of Southampton researchers found.
In 2000 the government recommended that patients calling their GP out of hours would be automatically diverted to NHS Direct for an initial assessment by telephone.
The researchers’ report, published in the British Medical Journal, reads: ‘NHS Direct may not have the capacity to manage all out-of-hours demand in the way the 2000 review envisaged.’
The report also concludes that integrating out-of-hours calls with NHS Direct led to a ‘small but significant’ reduction in demand for care.
A Department of Health spokesperson said NHS Direct was never intended to be the only ‘gateway’ to out-of-hours services.
‘NHS Direct is one possible route to treatment. Patients now have a choice of whether to contact their GP services directly or to use NHS Direct,’ the spokesperson said.

NHS claims victory on fraud
Dishonest nurses have been caught along with other criminals by NHS fraud inspectors, who claim to have saved the health service nearly £700 million – enough to build five new hospitals.
Many of the nurses falsified timesheets and claimed for far more hours than they had worked (see box).
The NHS Counter Fraud and Security Management Service (CFSMS) says uncovering crimes such as these has cut losses from fraud by 54 per cent since it was set up in 1998. Its 500 anti-fraud specialists investigate scams by patients, staff and contractors.
Bill Darling, chair of the CFSMS, said: ‘A saving of this magnitude confirms our staff’s commitment and their dedication to tackling the minority who defraud the health service.
‘Instead of lining fraudsters’ pockets, these savings are being spent on improving front line services.’

Caught red-handed: nurses who paid the price
* A London agency nurse submitted fraudulent timesheets for shifts she did not work at the Heart Hospital. In July 2004 she was found guilty of obtaining £35,000 by deception and jailed for 15 months.
* A senior nurse submitted timesheets for shifts she did not work at Newham General Hospital in London. She had claimed payment for £5,213, some of which she had paid back. In July 2004 she was sentenced to 180 hours’ community service and ordered to repay the money.
* A mental health nurse falsified timesheets for bank shifts at the Cardiff and Vale NHS Trust. She falsely claimed for 191 shifts totalling almost £36,000. In June 2004 she was jailed for nine months.

NEW HEAD AT HIGH-FLYERS’ ASSOCIATION
The group that represents some of the UK’s leading nurses has appointed a new acting chief executive.
The Nurse Directors Association (NDA) has announced that Liz Fradd (pictured) will take up the post following the departure of Irene Scott. Ms Fradd will work for the NDA two days a week for six months.
Ms Fradd is a former director of nursing and head of clinical governance at the Commission for Health Improvement, the NHS standards inspectorate.
She takes over from Ms Scott, who was appointed as the NDA’s first paid director last summer.
Ms Fradd said: ‘The main thing is to work with nurse directors. Most of them have far too wide a span of responsibility and confused lines of communication. They find it very difficult to influence nurses who they do not directly manage.’
The NDA says it will continue to provide support and development for senior nurses, influence UK health policy and nurture nurse leaders in the NHS, independent sector and the armed forces.
NDA executive officer Anne McPherson said: ‘With Liz Fradd’s background, she will be ideally placed to take the organisation forward.’