Crackdown leads to 15-fold rise in convictions for NHS attacks

By Sue Learner

The number of people convicted for attacking nurses has risen dramatically, but unions say more still needs to be done to crack down on violence.

Successful prosecutions of people who attacked NHS staff leapt from 51 in 2002/03 to 759 in 2004/05.

The RCN welcomed the 15-fold increase. But RCN England director Tom Sandford warned: ‘These figures come from a very low starting point. It is important to remember that historically there has been a very small number of prosecutions.’

He added that in 2002/03 there were 116,000 violent and verbal attacks on NHS staff. Of these only 5 per cent were reported to the police – and only 2 per cent of perpetrators were prosecuted.

Amai Gold, a nurse who was attacked while on duty, believes the rise in prosecutions will not encourage more people to come forward. Ms Gold, who was stabbed with a needle by a patient, sustaining long-term damage to her hand, said: ‘Colleagues in three different trusts feel they would not get adequate support from management.

‘This is due to a number of factors. They fear being seen as a trouble maker or being ostracised by their peers. They also feel that the law is on the perpetrators’ side.’

Ms Gold, who is currently working at Walsgrave Hospital, Coventry, wants nurses to have equal status to police officers who benefit from special protection under the Police Act.

Unison head of health Karen Jennings agreed that nurses lack confidence in the judicial system. ‘Many of those who are assaulted feel that their crime is not taken seriously enough as it is not taken to court. If it does end up in court, the penalty is so small – the attacker often just gets a small fine – that nurses feel they have been hit twice.’

Private prosecution

The NHS Security Management Service (SMS) has been working since November 2003 to increase the number of prosecutions and prevent violence against staff.

Action by NHS SMS led to the conviction of Stephan Robert Yeoman, a patient who set fire to a ward at York Hospital and stabbed a nurse in the back in September 2004. He was given a discretionary life sentence in June this year.

It has also set up a new Legal Protection Unit, which is bringing its first private prosecution against a man alleged to have carried out a common assault on a nurse.

The unit is bringing the prosecution in partnership with Burnley, Pendle and Rossendale Primary Care Trust against Jason Butcher, who is due to be tried on November 9.

Care homes tap into water

Drinking water should be more readily accessible in care homes to reduce the incidence of constipation, urinary infections and diabetes, an organisation representing independent sector providers said last week.

The English Community Care Association (ECCA) is encouraging its members to give older people more water. ECCA chief executive Martin Green said: ‘Drinking water makes good economic sense for care homes on tight budgets. By helping to take away some of the more common ailments, it improves wellbeing and can reduce the volume of medicines required.’

The ECCA has studied health benefits in conjunction with Water UK, which represent water service providers.

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