Rule change clarifies process for consent to access records

Nurses and other healthcare professionals will have to seek patients’ permission before accessing their electronic records, under new rules announced by NHS Connecting for Health (CfH) last week.

The body responsible for computerising NHS records in England said where a patient cannot give consent, for example if brought into A&E unconscious, clinicians will be allowed to access their records, but they may have to justify their actions afterwards.

The move was greeted as ‘positive’ by RCN policy adviser Tim Curry. ‘We are happy that there has been this clarification and more certainty about the consent process. It gives staff a real opportunity to raise with patients the purpose and uses of electronic records.’

Lack of awareness

The new rules follow concerns that the previous consent model was too complicated and could be open to abuse. Consultation with nurses and doctors, and an independent evaluation of summary care records by University College London (UCL), confirmed that the rules needed to be changed.

The UCL study found that hospital-based nurses and doctors were unaware that they were already required to seek permission from a minority of patients before accessing their files. Most patients did not know that their records had been transmitted from their GP surgery to other parts of the NHS.

CfH national nursing clinical lead Barbara Stuttle told Nursing Standard that it was good practice for patients to know what happened to their information and who was accessing it.

‘Nurses will need to change their practice and some of it will be about nurses remembering to ask,’ she said.

NHS CfH has also launched a 12-week consultation on the wider use of patient information, including for research purposes, disease surveillance, screening, needs assessment and prevention.

Nurses, other health professionals and the public are being encouraged to take part. Details are available on the CfH website: www.connectingforhealth.nhs.uk

Regulation to be discussed with minister

The future of the Nursing and the Midwifery Council (NMC) was on the agenda when health minister Ben Bradshaw met RCN general secretary Peter Carter at the Labour Party conference this week.

An RCN spokesperson said they were expected to discuss issues covered by Mr Bradshaw’s ministerial brief, including professional regulation, as well as areas such as finance, information technology and emergency care.

In March, Mr Bradshaw ordered an inquiry into the NMC after allegations from various staff and council members of bullying, harassment and financial mismanagement were read out in parliament by MP Jim Devine.

Mr Bradshaw told MPs that the government would help rebuild the NMC and improve its standing.

Dr Carter was due to take part in a fringe debate at this week’s Labour conference in Manchester on how the Labour party can ‘win the battle’ on health. Health minister and former nurse Ann Keen was also due to take part.

Cardiac rehab programmes short of staff and funds

Patients are receiving just 79 per cent of the recommended nursing time for cardiac rehabilitation due to understaffing and underfunding of services, an audit has revealed.

The British Heart Foundation (BHF) found that none of the 374 cardiac rehabilitation programmes in the UK that responded to its survey met the charity’s minimum staffing levels for nurses, physiotherapists and dieticians.

Fifty five per cent of programmes were significantly underfunded, resulting in three in five heart patients who needed rehabilitation not having access to it, BHF researchers found.

Northumberland cardiac rehabilitation nurse Alice Whincup said services for patients were ‘running at risk due to funding issues, even though the service exceeded expectations’.

She said the local primary care trust had now allocated recurrent funding to allow three of the four BHF project venues to continue ‘for the time being’.

In its 2000 National Service Framework for Coronary Heart Disease, the government set a target for 85 per cent of heart attack, angioplasty and coronary artery bypass surgery patients to be invited to attend cardiac rehabilitation by 2002.

But BHF director of prevention and care Mike Knapton said only ‘minimal progress’ had been made to meet the target.

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