Substance abuse: crucial role for all nurses

Nurses in all areas have a crucial role in preventing and ameliorating the effects of substance misuse, the Chair of the RCN’s Substance Misuse Forum has said. Writing in International Nursing Review, Antony Sheehan says nurses 'in all guises' come into contact with this client group and their families. 'The enormity of the consequences is wide-reaching and touches all nurses. The problem falls squarely on all shoulders to make a contribution,' he says. 'We should not assume that only "specialist" nurses must deal with the effects of this pandemic.'

The consequences of the drug problem are enormous, with millions dying each year as a direct result of consuming drugs, including tobacco and alcohol. 'Fighting the "drug war" occupies the thoughts, time and finances of almost every country's legislative process,' Mr Sheehan argues.

He says the nurse has a multiple role in dealing with substance abuse, including as counsellor, advocate and researcher. But the most important is that of educator and health promoter: 'Roles that emphasise the nurse's rightful place as co-ordinator of patient care and the importance of health education in reducing substance abuse.'

Mr Sheehan says nurses should promote awareness sessions in schools, colleges and workplaces, and should advocate policies that support those affected. The reality is that drugs are neither good nor bad: it is the context in which they are used which can make them harmful,' he concludes.

Mammography improves cancer survival rates

A new study of young women with breast cancer has indicated that detection by mammography can improve survival.

Researchers from Boston, writing in The Lancet, claim their findings contradict the suggestion that women aged under 50 are put at a survival disadvantage by undergoing mammography.

And they argue that investigators who have reported negative results in women aged under 50 should look at alternative explanations for their findings instead of blaming the detrimental effects of mammography itself.

The team studied all women aged under 50 with breast cancer who were diagnosed at the Massachusetts General Hospital between May 1978 and April 1991. Five-year survival for all mammographically detected cancer patients was 95 per cent, compared with 74 per cent for those with palpable cancers. When the researchers excluded those with ductal carcinoma in situ, which can only be picked up by mammograph, corresponding survival rates were 91 per cent and 72 per cent.

Survival is directly related to the size of the tumour and the stage at which it is detected, says the Boston team. Their review indicates that mammography can detect lesions earlier, even among younger women.

Sylvia Denton, Chair of the RCN Breast Care Nursing Society, said the Society had campaigned for and now supported Britain's national breast screening programme, which is provided for all women aged over 50. 'It is the best thing we have,' she added, 'although we recognise that there has to be on-going evaluation. A great strength of the British programme is that it has in-built quality assurance.'

A randomised British trial involving 190,000 women is being carried out for the UK Co-ordinating Committee for Cancer Research. It will examine the benefits of screening women aged between 40 and 50, and is expected to report within the next seven years.

Air travel blamed for resurgence of diseases

International air travel may be contributing to a resurgence of infectious diseases, some of which experts believed had been conquered.

New outbreaks of yellow fever, malaria and giardiasis can be attributed to the greater mobility of the world's population, according to a panel of experts who met in Washington DC recently. Denser population centres and land irrigation are also to blame for the spread of diseases, including cholera, dengue and other viral fevers.

A report in New Scientist says victory in the war against infectious diseases was declared too soon, and quotes the panel's warning that the danger the diseases pose, instead of receding, is actually increasing. The panel recommends stockpiling vaccines and pesticides against the possibility of future epidemics.

Drug-resistant tuberculosis, AIDS, tick-borne Lyme disease and a new, lethal form of streptococcal infection are examples of the growing threat of microbes.

In a report for the United States National Academy of Sciences, the panel criticises doctors and patients for the misuse of antibiotics, thereby contributing to the growth of strains resistant to drugs.