Stabbing at mental health centre – nurses criticised

By Graham Scott
Nurses at a Devon mental health unit where an occupational therapist was stabbed to death by a patient have come under fire in the official report of the incident.

The report was written by an inquiry team led by Sir Louis Blom Cooper and follows the murder of Georgina Robinson at Torbay’s Edith Morgan Centre, part of South Devon Healthcare NHS Trust, in September 1993. It says staff at the trust were ‘in glorious uncertainty’ of their legal powers and duties.

It reveals the patient, Andrew Robinson, was allowed to leave the unit unsupervised on two occasions, the first as a result of lax policy and the second sanctioned by a senior nurse. On the first trip he bought the knife he used to kill the therapist.

‘Georgina Robinson’s death in that sense was preventable, the responsibility for which lies with the trust’s management and the staff of the Edith Morgan Centre,’ the report says.

The report calls for an overhaul of mental health legislation to include provisions to give professionals the power to force patients in the community to take medication.

But mental health charity MIND criticised this recommendation. ‘The suggestion that new legal powers are needed to make people take their medication is not the answer for people diagnosed mentally ill,’ MIND said, pointing out that psychiatric medication in itself was responsible for one death a week in the UK.

The incident has already led to restructuring of the trust’s management, said Sue Simmons, appointed head of mental health nursing as part of the reorganisation. ‘We have worked rigorously to put very stringent procedures in place. I am currently looking at what training and updating nurses need on the Mental Health Act,’ she added.

- A nurse has been recruited by three London police stations to help deal with mentally ill suspects in a one-year project funded by the Home Office. David Etherington will assess whether suspects should be referred to psychiatric services.
- An advice service on depression has opened as a six-month pilot project in Wales. A multidisciplinary panel of experts aims to support GPs and other staff who may not have the resources to deal with depression.

Nurses saved lives after Guy’s power failure

Nurses at Guy’s Hospital, London, saved 21 intensive care patients after the power supply to life support machines was lost. The nurses manually ventilated the 13 adults and eight babies for 20 minutes after they were alerted to the power failure just before Christmas. The management of the hospital praised staff for their actions.

The electrical supply to wards on four floors of the hospital shutdown while a staff Christmas party was going on. Nurses from other departments were called in to help ventilate the patients until power was restored. One baby later died, but medical staff said the death was not related to the incident.

A former employee of the hospital has been charged with criminal damage and being reckless as to whether life was endangered. Police are interviewing other members of staff as part of their inquiries. A hospital spokesperson said security at Guy’s had been stepped up since the incident.

Meanwhile, doctors have warned of the risks of resuscitating patients on ventilators after a patient at Northwick Park Hospital, London, was badly burned when staff used a defibrillator on her.

Inquiries into the fire have now been launched by the hospital, the Department of Health and the Health and Safety Executive.

The doctors involved have written to the British Medical Journal to warn of the potential dangers highlighted by the incident.

Day by day: The Centre for Mental Health Services Development has launched its 1996 calendar and art competition which will feature artwork by users of mental health services. The best entries will be included in a touring exhibition in August. The 1995 calendar has a picture with every month, like this one representing March, by E.P. Nicholson at St Nicholas’s Hospital, Newcastle. For further details contact the centre on 0171 333 4194.

Call for free nursing home places

A county council which wrote to nursing home owners asking them to provide places for free until the end of the financial year was attacked last week by the Royal College of Nursing.

Surrey County Council has been inundated with offers of help, but Linda Nazarko, vice chair of the RCN’s residential care managers’ forum, said the request was ‘ludicrous’.

Bids for Changing Childbirth projects

The government is inviting bids for a second round of pilot projects linked to the Changing Childbirth midwifery initiative.

Junior health minister Baroness Julia Cumberlege announced the £971,000 funding at an education and training workshop last week.

She said the government would be looking for examples of innovative thinking and she would like to see a few education and training proposals among the bids.