Unannounced visits reveal the best and worst of today’s NHS

Petra Kendall-Raynor reports on the initial findings – both positive and negative – of the Care Quality Commission’s ward inspection programme

Three weeks ago nurses woke up to shocking headlines that doctors had felt it necessary to prescribe water for thirsty patients on wards.

The revelation emerged in the first reports from a series of dignity and nutrition inspections showing that, in some trusts, basic care standards are being ignored.

The Care Quality Commission (CQC) has been carrying out unannounced visits to hospitals across England since February.

The move was prompted by reports from the Patients Association, Age UK and the health ombudsman, all of which uncovered appalling care of older people.

Results from 100 inspections will be released throughout the summer, ending with a full report in the autumn.

Some of the CQC’s findings include inaccessible call bells and commodes taken to patient bed spaces at mealtimes. But the inspection teams, which included nurses, also found many examples of best practice during their visits.

United Lincolnshire Hospitals NHS Trust was one of many organisations found to have met all the essential standards for dignity and nutrition.

To bolster its provision of dignified care the trust has produced a dignity pledge. Patients and visitors are encouraged to challenge staff if they feel the six pledges are not being upheld and volunteers...
will gather feedback from patients. The pledges were introduced following a proposal by a trust chaplain and its dignity committee.

Director of nursing and patient services Sylvia Knight believes the pledge will serve as a reminder to nurses about the care they should be providing. ‘These pledges show staff that it is okay to have conversations about what is important in patient care,” she says.

The CQC inspections found good use of the red tray nutrition aid across some trusts. The scheme helps to identify patients who might need support with eating and drinking.

Cardiff University nursing lecturer Colin Rees, who co-authored a report on the red tray initiative, says: ‘There needs to be a philosophy of caring to underpin the use of the tray. Nurses are working in extremely complex environments, but there is still the opportunity to ensure people are cared for.’

RCN associate head of nursing Tim Curry, who worked on the college’s 2007 Nutrition Now campaign to raise the standards of nutrition and hydration in hospitals and the community, says: ‘All good practice starts with a passion for people, dignity and the realisation that what we are offering is a service to other human beings.’

Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) chief executive Dickon Weir-Hughes says 8 per cent of fitness to practise cases relate to negligence in fundamental elements of care. ‘Unless cases are referred to us, we will never know about it.’

The NMC would be willing to work on some academic research with a university on the subject, he adds.

He says that although there were many positive findings in the CQC reports, poor care needs to be tackled through leadership ‘on every shift’, with a nurse on the ward in charge of ensuring mealtimes are protected and other vital systems are being carried out correctly.

**Taking action**

He urged directors of nursing to go on to wards and test hospital food with a dietician to ensure patients are receiving the right amount of calories for good nutrition.

Professor Weir-Hughes has been in contact with the CQC about the inspections. He says the NMC has already opened fitness to practise case files as a result of the reports, but has yet to consider individual nurses.

England’s chief nursing officer Dame Chris Beasley has agreed with strategic health authority directors of nursing to contact the trusts criticised by the CQC to ensure they have robust plans in place to make necessary improvements.

Worcestershire Acute Hospitals NHS Trust failed both of the essential standards and has organised a series of positive actions. Its director of nursing and midwifery Helen Blanchard described the CQC findings as an ‘unpleasant surprise’ because the wards concerned usually attract a high number of compliments from patients.

But she said the CQC exercise was a useful reminder to scrutinise the levels of service and make sure high standards are achieved consistently.

**Unacceptable standards: examples of what hospital inspectors found**

- Dignity
  - Theatre staff asked a patient to remove his dentures – and then asked him questions.
  - Commodes were taken to patients’ bed spaces at mealtimes.
  - Call bells were left in inaccessible places.
  - Staff spoke to patients in a condescending manner.
  - A cannula was removed from a patient’s hand without the curtain being drawn around the bed.

- Nutrition
  - Patients were not offered the opportunity to wash their hands before meals.
  - Napkins were not offered to patients, who were seen to wipe their soiled hands on bed sheets or clothing after eating.
  - Drinking water had to be prescribed to ensure adequate patient hydration.
  - Patients were left to eat food without assistance while lying down.

**‘Good practice starts with a passion for people and dignity. We are offering a service to other human beings’**

Action on Elder Abuse chief executive Gary Fitzgerald believes it is important for the NMC to research why nurses fail to carry out basic tasks correctly.

‘There are far more people working in health care who want to do a good job in the face of adversity than those who want to be abusive. But if a nurse gets struck off the register, we have to work out why it happened.’

CQC dignity and nutrition inspection programme lead Debbie Mead says the final report will provide an overall picture of the quality of care.

‘Trusts that failed to meet essential standards must understand that making changes is not simply about finances,” she warns. ‘The manner in which people are treated costs absolutely nothing.”

The CQC has so far released the findings from 40 inspections. To access the reports go to http://tinyurl.com/3gqfoxq

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