Trusts want highly trained nurses to plug shortage of A&E doctors

Exclusive by Tamsin Snow

An NHS trust that has trained nurses in advanced A&E skills has been contacted by around 30 organisations looking to introduce similar schemes to make up for a shortage of doctors.

Heart of England NHS Foundation Trust has 16 whole-time equivalent advanced clinical practitioners (ACPs) working across three emergency departments in the West Midlands. The nurses are on the same rota as medical registrars.

A UK-wide survey by the College of Emergency Medicine carried out in June last year found around a third of emergency doctor positions were either vacant or filled by locums.

The Mid Yorkshire Hospitals NHS Trust recently asked the army whether its medics could staff Pontefract Hospital’s A&E, which has been closed overnight since November. The move was ruled out last week.

In addition, Stafford Hospital’s emergency department has been closed overnight since December due to a shortage of A&E doctors.

The move to develop the role of ACPs was spearheaded by Heart of England’s emergency care nurse consultant Garry Swann. He told Nursing Standard that A&E would ‘collapse’ without the nurses.

‘This is no quick fix or cheap option. We have invested significantly in the role because we are confident that they deliver in terms of numbers of patients seen, their adherence to guidelines and the fact they appear, on average, to make fewer mistakes.’

As part of the Heart of England initiative, ACPs Ruth Smith and Tanya Kershaw studied part time for masters degrees in applied health sciences at Warwick Medical School. They now have the expertise to treat any patient in A&E. Ms Smith said: ‘It has been an exciting opportunity to maintain a strong clinical focus rather than a managerial role.’

Cost effective

ACPs are on band 7 for one year and then progress to band 8a. ‘From a value for money perspective, they are earning the department three to four times more than their salary,’ Mr Swann said.

Mr Swann is a member of a Department of Health (DH) emergency medicine taskforce group seeking solutions to the shortfall of middle-ranking A&E doctors. It will provide interim guidance in the spring ahead of a report in the autumn.

Mr Swann said the ACP role could go some way to make up for the lack of medics in A&E.

RCN emergency care association chair and consultant emergency nurse Andrew Frazer, who also sits on the DH taskforce, agrees.

Mr Frazer predicted that nurses with advanced A&E skills will be introduced in every emergency department to treat patients with major injuries.

PRIDE IN PRACTICE SEeks SIGNATURES

An initiative to ensure GP surgeries in north west England meet acceptable standards when providing healthcare to lesbian, gay and bisexual patients is being launched this month.

NHS North West and the Lesbian and Gay Foundation charity are calling on general practices in the region to sign up to the Pride in Practice project, which sets out standards to ensure that services meet the needs of lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) patients.

Practices that sign up to the standard will be expected to train staff on specific LGB issues, monitor sexual orientation and use more inclusive language.

As part of the initiative, practice nurses will be expected to consult a Pride in Practice toolkit, which outlines specific areas to consult LGB patients about, including mental health, eating disorders, sexual health and hepatitis.

The toolkit reiterates the need for nurses to remind lesbian and bisexual women of the importance of going for regular cervical screening. The foundation hopes the initiative will be replicated across the UK.