Political notebook
Our weekly round-up of news from the corridors of power

Dog attacks on health visitors working in the community helped persuade the government to introduce tougher laws against dangerous dogs.

Announcing legislation to crack down harder on the owners of dangerous dogs, environment secretary James Paice said the number of people treated in England for dog bites has doubled in a decade to more than 6,100 a year.

Postal workers suffered the largest number of attacks, but Mr Paice added: ‘Concerns have also been raised about dog attacks on health visitors and social workers during home visits.’

Mr Paice said the government intends to extend dangerous dog legislation to cover attacks on private property.

- The government plans to look for new ways of improving the experience of cancer patients during treatment.

Health minister Earl Howe has promised the results of a major survey of cancer patients conducted last year will be used to identify what needs to be done. The assurance followed complaints during a Lords’ debate that nurse specialists were not receiving the resources they need to do their jobs properly.

Tory peer Lord Aberdare and Labour’s Baroness Warwick of Undercliffe argued that, although nurse specialists made a big difference to the experience of people with cancer, patients’ access to them was still limited.

Union branches urged to unite in defence of Agenda for Change

Healthcare professionals are being warned by Unison that employers’ moves to erode their pay, terms and conditions will not ease off unless local branches unite and take coordinated action.

Nurses’ entitlement to annual leave, incremental pay progression and sick leave is being threatened by employers across England, Unison’s annual health conference in Brighton was told last week.

Three motions on protecting Agenda for Change (AFC) conditions were agreed unanimously by delegates at the conference.

One motion called on Unison’s service group executive to support local branches in defending the national pay agreement and roll out training courses on tackling AFC-related issues. Speakers in support of the motion said that unless action is taken at a national level, more employers would attack AFC.

Out of around 150 attendees at an AFC fringe session, 30 said their organisations had mooted changes to their conditions, 12 people said organisations had tabled proposals and six people said their organisations had already implemented fundamental changes to AFC.

Unison senior national officer for health Sara Gorton said it is important to mobilise action at a local level.

“We need to raise awareness and build up support for the defence of AFC to stop us from being pushed into concession bargaining.”

Unison general secretary Dave Prentis reassured his members that the union will not sit back and allow the national pay agreement to be attacked. He added: ‘If needs be we will move to industrial action to protect everything that is right and we will win.’

The union launched a guidance pack at the event, which contains case studies and tips on how local branches could make a stand against employers.

Unison national secretary for health Christina McAnea said the union will conduct a survey of staff-side representatives in England to find out which employers are proposing moves away from AFC.

Emergency services
A nurses’ union has warned that thousands of people living in rural parts of New South Wales, Australia, will be without 24-hour emergency services because of staff cutbacks at the local Bonalbo Hospital.

The New South Wales Nurses Association said that the nearest hospital with a doctor on call was in Casino, 70km away. Its general secretary Brett Holmes said that limited resources would become ‘dangerously stretched by the move’.

Staff safety
Nurses and doctors across Turkey have staged protests about assaults at work and are calling for investment in hospital security services to protect healthcare staff.

They argue that hospitals lack security workers who are trained to deal with aggressive people.

The protests follow a series of attacks on healthcare workers in the country.

Health minister Recep Akdag said he would take steps to ensure the safety of healthcare professionals.

Governance
Fijian nurses are calling for the country’s new regulatory body to be separate of central government by 2013. The government set up the Fiji Nursing Council last year to license and regulate nurses and midwives.

The Fiji Nursing Association (FNA), a union representing the country’s nurses, debated the issue at its recent annual general meeting.

FNA director of nursing services Silina Ledua told the conference that an independent council would function in a more robust way and respond rapidly to the needs of the profession. ‘This will give a free arm to develop relevant policies and guidelines intended for the safety of practice and the protection of our clients and patients.’