NEW HEALTH SECRETARY PRAISES NHS WORKERS

Jeremy Hunt (pictured) last week met nurses for the first time since becoming England’s health secretary. He was given a tour of St Thomas’ Hospital in London and was told about staff training and how nurses look after patients who need extra care.

The visit took place before health minister Dan Poulter, a hospital doctor, was given the responsibility of nursing following the government reshuffle.

Dr Poulter’s portfolio, announced this week, was previously the responsibility of former nurse Anne Milton, who was demoted to the chief whip’s office. The reshuffle puts Norman Lamb in charge of long-term conditions. See page 12.

Mid Staffs’ £15m deficit sparks financial scrutiny by Monitor

By Jennifer Sprinks

Nurses at the troubled Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust say they are concerned and surprised after learning their organisation could go into special administration.

Foundation trust regulator Monitor is sending in experts to look at the trust’s finances after Mid Staffs predicted a £15 million deficit at the end of this financial year.

Monitor said the experts will ‘set out an agreed plan to provide the hospital services that local patients need’ by spring next year. Solutions could include a solvent restructuring of the trust or placing it in special administration, the same fate experienced by South London Healthcare Trust in July.

Unison regional organiser Ray Salmon said nursing staff are surprised at the move, as various public bodies recently reported they were making good progress.

‘People thought we were heading in the right direction and everything was fine,’ he said. ‘Now staff are concerned about the future. The whole thing is demoralising for staff.’

He added that the anticipation of the second Francis inquiry report’s publication next month is intensifying their anxiety.

RCN assistant officer for Stafford Chris Timmis said the news of Monitor’s intervention was just as unexpected for staff as it was for everyone else. However, the trust, which manages Stafford and Cannock Chase hospitals, has experienced financial difficulties for some time, reporting a deficit of around £20 million in the past financial year.

Cost versus quality

Monitor interim chief executive David Bennett said a solution to the deficit is necessary for the trust to sustain ‘significant improvements’ in clinical care, but he is keeping an open mind about what action should be taken.

RCN head of policy Howard Catton said striking the balance between costs and the quality of care is ‘incredibly difficult’ to achieve.

‘It could be that the sharp focus on quality following the first Francis inquiry meant that some of the cost-saving measures the trust would have considered were no-go areas because of the possible impact on patient care.’

Unison head of nursing Gail Adams suggested that Monitor is taking pre-emptive action in anticipation that it will be criticised in the second Francis inquiry report.

The Mid Staffs nursing and midwifery strategy for 2012-2015, which included plans to develop the leadership role of ward sisters, was presented to the trust board last month.

The trust’s deputy director of nursing Kara Blackwell told Nursing Standard that Monitor’s focus on finances will not stop the nursing strategy being implemented.

Monitor’s announcement comes as the Mid Staffordshire commissioning board took the decision not to re-open the trust’s A&E unit at night. The unit has been temporarily closed overnight since December.