A lack of staff is so often at the root of poor care

Another round of negative reports on the care being provided in hospitals and care homes has made for salutary reading this week. The Patients Association and the Care Quality Commission sounded the alarm, with both organisations pointing out that nursing staff in many organisations are overstretched. The result is that patients suffer.

As nurse consultant Lynne Phair stressed in last week’s Nursing Standard, patient neglect cannot be excused by staff shortages or excessive paperwork. But too often a lack of nurses and diluted skill mix lie behind distressing stories of patients being ill-treated.

The prime minister’s nursing and care quality forum provides some hope amid all the gloom. Its chair, Sally Bearrley, insists she will be independent of government and will produce robust recommendations for David Cameron. Its four priority themes include ensuring that nurses have the time to give high-quality care and promoting accountable nurse leaders across the NHS.

The forum has already indicated that it wants ward sisters and charge nurses to be in exclusively supervisory roles, overseeing their wards and teams without trying to manage their own caseloads at the same time. However, a survey conducted by Nursing Standard this week suggests that only a small minority of NHS organisations have taken this step already.

Outcomes are positive in those that have invested in their nursing teams in this way. For example, the proportion of patients whose nutritional needs have been assessed properly at East Cheshire NHS Trust has risen from only 62 per cent to an impressive 95 per cent.

Scotland’s health secretary Alex Neil has ordered a review of staffing changes, while his English counterpart Jeremy Hunt said there will be no hiding place for those providing poor care or responsible for substandard practice.

Mr Hunt is right, but he should be aware there will be nowhere for him to hide if he stands idly while employers casually cut thousands of nursing posts.

The result is that patients suffer.

See pages 5-7 and 12

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