Bring back named nurses and set safe staffing levels, inquiry says

By Petra Kendall-Raynor

Patients should be given a ‘named nurse’ who is responsible for co-ordinating every aspect of their care on each shift, the Francis report recommends.

The change is one of a series of proposals designed to overhaul the way wards are run and so prevent a repeat of the appalling care at Stafford Hospital that contributed to hundreds of deaths.

‘Named nurses need to take personal responsibility for, and be committed to, the care of their allocated patients,’ Robert Francis argues in his report.

‘They should be the front line “faces” to whom patients and those close to them turn for help and information, and on whom ward managers can rely to co-ordinate the provision of each patient’s needs.’

He adds that unnecessary restrictions on visiting hours should be lifted.

National Nursing Research Unit director Jill Maben said named nurses would be able to co-ordinate the care of only a small number of patients.

Her views were echoed by RCN head of policy Howard Catton, who stressed that more nurses would be needed to implement the proposal.

On staffing levels, Mr Francis says the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) should be asked to draw up evidence-based tools for establishing the number of staff needed for each service. ‘These measures need to be readily understood and accepted by the public and healthcare professionals.’

This recommendation was supported in the House of Lords by nurse peer Baroness Emerton, who said ministers should implement it urgently.

She pointed out that senior nurses have joined forces to lobby on the issue through the Safe Staffing Alliance, set up as part of the Care campaign being run by Nursing Standard.

For the government, Lord Hill replied that decisions about staffing levels need to be made locally.

Anne Marie Rafferty, professor of nursing policy at the Florence Nightingale School of Nursing and Midwifery, said that input from NICE would strengthen the evidence in support of safe staffing levels. But she said managers must act now to ensure they are employing the right number and mix of staff.

Falling nurse numbers

Latest figures from the NHS Information Centre reveal that the number of full-time equivalent nurses in the English health service has plummeted by 5,733 since May 2010.

Research undertaken on behalf of Nursing Standard last year showed that the best-performing trusts employ more nurses than those that are struggling.

At Stafford, the ratio of nurses to nursing assistants was slashed to 40:60. Recent RCN guidance says the minimum ratio on medical wards should be 65:35.

Unison head of health, Christina McAnea, said her union had been campaigning for higher staffing levels and urged NHS organisations and nursing leaders to be receptive to change in the wake of the Francis report.

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OVERHAUL FOR COMPLAINTS PROCESS

A nurse invited by prime minister David Cameron to examine the way patient complaints are handled by the NHS says she will ask patient groups about best practice.

‘Tricia Hart, chief executive of South Tees NHS Foundation Trust, will work with Labour MP Ann Clwyd on the initiative. Ms Clwyd has accused NHS staff of treating her husband like a “battery her” before his death.

Professor Hart said the pair will make recommendations to Mr Cameron before the parliamentary summer recess.

“We have had feedback from patients saying they were not sure how to complain. They did not know whether they should write, or whether they should expect a response.”

Professor Hart was an assessor for Robert Francis on his public inquiry.