**Mid Staffs performance improves but police review is unsettling**

By Jennifer Sprinks

The director of nursing at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust says that nurses feel positive about patient care despite the latest police review into deaths at Stafford Hospital.

Stafford Police last week began examining deaths at the hospital between 2005 and 2009.

Colin Ovington told Nursing Standard that staff have worked ‘tremendously hard’ to improve standards and patient care in an attempt to put the organisation’s troubled history behind them.

He said nurses carry out either hourly or two-hourly comfort rounds to check patients have everything they need. In addition, a standardised ‘nursing notes’ booklet, which accompanies patients on their journey through the trust, has been introduced to reduce the duplication of information collected, as well as improve consistency in documentation.

Mr Ovington said the improvements are making a difference. He said this has been demonstrated by positive patient feedback and data from the independent company Dr Foster Intelligence, which ranked the trust in the top 20 per cent for mortality data, meaning it has fewer deaths than expected compared with other organisations across the UK.

Mr Ovington added: ‘On the whole staff are feeling generally positive, but some anxiety is sitting underneath it all. Staff are not sure which deaths are being investigated and whether they involve staff still employed by this organisation.’

The police are conducting a multi-agency review with senior representatives from organisations, including the Crown Prosecution Service and the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) to establish whether any doctors or nurses could face criminal charges or prosecution for neglect.

The group has been examining all 4,253 deaths at Stafford Hospital between 2005 and 2009 on the orders of health secretary Jeremy Hunt.

Mr Hunt said: ‘We must allow the police to do their work, but no one is above the law and it is important that justice be done.’

Staffordshire Police assistant chief constable Nick Baker, who is leading the review, said the group is examining whether new information that has come to light could lead to a previous criminal investigation being re-opened or an entirely new investigation.

‘If we get to this stage, our next step will be to establish if there is any realistic potential for criminal charges and prosecution,’ he said.

Uncertainty

RCN West Midlands regional director Paul Vaughan said: ‘The biggest challenge at the moment is around everyone feeling that the organisation’s future is uncertain and the risk for the hospital is that people will start leaving and getting jobs elsewhere because they are not feeling secure in their posts.’

The NMC is investigating how it can improve the support it provides to witnesses at fitness to practise hearings.

NMC head of hearings Sarah Page met Mid Staffs whistleblower nurse Helene Donnelly to find out more about her experience as a witness.

Ms Donnelly, who raised concerns about staff bullying and poor treatment of patients when she worked as an emergency nurse at Stafford Hospital, gave evidence against former colleagues in April.

**NURSES ADMIT TO CARE FAILURES**

Two Stafford Hospital nurses accused of poor care by the Nursing and Midwifery Council have been found guilty of professional misconduct for failing to follow hospital procedures.

The charges against staff nurses Evelyn Agboko and Theresia Van Der Knaap involve an incident that occurred while they were caring for a patient on an older people’s ward in April 2010.

Among the charges were failing to make adequate entries on a patient’s observation and fluid balance chart, and failing to call a resuscitation team when the patient was found to be unresponsive.

Ms Van Der Knaap told the NMC fitness to practise panel that she found it hard working for an organisation where documentation was not always completed adequately and observation charts sometimes got ‘misplaced’.

‘It has been a traumatic time and I do regret the things that happened on this shift. There were many more incidents at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust that caused me concern and led me, in the end, to leave,’ she said.

The nurses’ sanctions are yet to be determined. Fifty five registrants from the trust have been referred to the NMC since the end of 2009. Five nurses, including former nurse director Janice Harry, will have their cases heard next month.