Nurse support in police stations could help reduce reoffending

Specialist nurses could hold the key to helping offenders whose learning disabilities often go ignored by police and criminal courts, the RCN says.

A joint inspection report, published last week, says that up to 30 per cent of people in the criminal justice system in England have learning disabilities, yet many are denied support.

The report by HM Probation, HM Constabulary, HM Crown Prosecution Inspectorate and health watchdog the Care Quality Commission revealed that the needs of many are going unnoticed when they are arrested, attend court and face sentencing.

A lack of training to identify learning disabilities means suspects are being treated as a ‘problem’ rather than as an individual in need of help, the report said. Inspectors also expressed concern that healthcare professionals trained to work with people who have learning disabilities are unavailable in police custody suites.

RCN learning disabilities and criminal justice nursing adviser Ann Norman said specialist nurses are in a good position to get suspects faster access to support.

‘No one expects police officers to be experts in mental health or learning disabilities,’ she said. ‘But having specialist nurses working alongside police would increase their awareness.’

The inspection report follows the announcement of a £25 million scheme to post more mental health and learning disability nurses in police stations and courts in a bid to reduce reoffending.

The government-backed scheme, being trialled in ten areas across England, will see suspects undergoing health checks for earlier intervention.

Care and support minister Norman Lamb said criminals with learning disabilities, mental health problems or substance misuse issues are ‘too often’ diagnosed only after they reach prison.

It is hoped the scheme will replicate the success of the nurse-led Court Assessment and Referral Service in Bristol, where nurses work with the courts and police to identify people with mental health or learning difficulties.

To read the report go to: tinyurl.com/offenders-LD

SPECIALISTS COULD HELP TO RAISE POLICE AWARENESS
– Ann Norman

A review is to be carried out into a major incident at Royal Victoria Hospital Belfast’s A&E, Northern Irish health minister Edwin Poots has announced.

Mr Poots said the Health and Social Care Board would be looking into the circumstances that led to a large backlog of emergency patients on January 9.

SDLP member Fearghal McKinney told an assembly debate that there was a ‘crisis of confidence’ among the public over A&E services, following problems at Royal Victoria Hospital Belfast and Craigavon Area Hospital in County Armagh.

RCN Scotland has met health minister Alex Neil and first minister Alex Salmond to discuss the possibility of health boards collecting data on the number of nurses on shift.

RCN Scotland director Theresa Fyffe said gathering data on nurse numbers would enable boards to respond quickly to ‘hotspots’, adding: ‘It is good news the Scottish government has committed to our proposal that each health board appoints a board-level champion to handle staff concerns.’

Drug use Substance misuse directly affects an estimated 10 per cent of all 18,000 working nurses in the American state of Montana, according to its board of nursing.

There are currently approximately 80 nurses using the Montana Nurses Assistance Program, which was established to help combat the problem.

The programme includes treatment, testing and on-the-job supervision so the nurses can prove they are fit to practise.

A board spokesperson said referrals to the programme had doubled in recent years because colleagues are more likely to encourage nurses to seek help. The board revealed that there is a particular problem because of access to prescription drugs.

Discrimination A Christian midwifery student in Sweden has reported her former employers for religious discrimination. Ellinor Grimmark said hospital bosses failed to extend her contract after she refused to assist with abortions. She worked her internship at a hospital in Eksjö and was due to have her contract extended to cover the summer period. But in the complaint Ms Grimmark submitted to the Swedish watchdog for equality, she claimed that the hospital retracted its offer after she told them her faith prevented her from taking part in abortions.

Strike threat The Kenya National Union of Nurses has threatened to take strike action to back its claims that chronic understaffing contributed to the death of a newborn.

Union leaders issued government leaders in the central region of Nyeri an ultimatum to employ 90 more nurses as a matter of urgency, or face a walkout by members.

The move follows the death of the baby last month at the Nyeri Provincial General Hospital maternity unit, where the union claims only three nurses were left to care for 25 patients.