Clinical director admits patient care was “compromised”

The former director of a breast cancer service, which was branded “a disgrace” by the former UK health secretary Frank Dobson, has acknowledged that patient care was “potentially compromised” in his unit. But he blamed it on an excessive workload and lack of resources.

John Brennan, clinical director of the East Devon breast screening service, told the General Medical Council’s professional conduct committee that he had been unaware of the service’s poor performance because his clinical work did not leave him time to check the cancer register.

Dr Brennan, aged 51, and a former colleague, consultant radiologist Dr Graham Urquhart, aged 55, are charged with serious professional misconduct for failing to provide an adequate standard of care in the diagnosis of breast cancer.

Dr Brennan resigned from the service in 1999 after an independent inquiry found that 24 women had been wrongly cleared of cancer and a further 61 had serious delays in their diagnosis. Eleven of the women have since died.

The two doctors have admitted failing to provide an adequate standard of care in the cases of 58 women but deny serious professional misconduct. The hearing is expected to finish in January.

Owen Dyer

New York debriefing is “a waste of time”

The mandatory debriefing of 55 000 US police and firefighters who have participated in the evacuation of New York’s World Trade Center, the searches for bodies, and the dismantling of remnants of the buildings is a waste of time and will not prevent anyone from developing post-traumatic stress disorder, says an Israeli psychologist and sleep expert.

Professor Peretz Lavie, one of the world’s leading experts in sleep medicine and director of the sleep laboratory at the Technion-Israel Institute of Technology in Haifa, writes in the New England Journal of Medicine (2001;343:1825-32) that people who have endured serious psychological trauma may not recover faster if forced to relive their memories.

In another break with conventional opinion, Professor Lavie denies that most victims of trauma suffer from insomnia. Although polls in New York show that prescriptions for sleeping pills have increased by 30% since 11 September, the Israeli sleep expert said people actually lose less sleep than they think.

“Trauma patients who claim they can’t sleep often confuse their fear of going to sleep with an inability to fall asleep,” Professor Lavie said.

Judy Siegel-Itzkovich Jerusalem

Anti-HIV drug resistance increases in US patients

Widespread misuse of anti-HIV drugs has led to the development of drug resistant viruses in at least half the people being treated for HIV in the United States.

A survey of 2000 patients with HIV was presented to the recent Interscience Committee on Antibiotics and Chemotherapy meeting in Chicago by RAND Corporation of Santa Monica and the University of California in San Diego. It found that of those alive in 1999 and under medical care about 37% had no detectable HIV in their blood—evidence that combination drug treatment had stopped the virus from replicating. That group presumably harboured no, or virtually no, resistant virus.

The remaining 63% had detectable HIV. This group included people taking antiretroviral drugs, people who had taken such treatment in the past but stopped, and people who had never been treated. Of all the people with a detectable virus, 78% carried a strain of virus resistant to at least one drug. Even newly infected patients, who have not yet taken the drug cocktails, are showing high levels of drug resistance.

According to the survey, well educated patients and their doctors follow research news and trends in treatment closely, and these patients change their treatment plans constantly in a never ending search for minimal side effects, ease of use, and viral suppression, according to the survey. With each switch of drug cocktail, the patients increase the likelihood of generating mutant viruses that can resist the drugs.

Scott Gottlieb New York

Medical Research Council sets agenda for autism

The Medical Research Council has published a major review of research which reveals that the prevalence of autism is higher than had been thought but indicates no association with the measles, mumps, and rubella vaccination.

The review was commissioned by the Department of Health in March 2001, partly in response to public concerns raised by research alleging that MMR vaccination might be linked to an apparent increase in the numbers of children with autism. It shows around six in 1000 young children have a disorder in the autism spectrum.

The report recommends building on the existing strengths of research into autism by improving coordination between different research disciplines and improving research training in service settings. It also called for more research on the definition of autism spectrum disorders, especially in adults.

More basic biological research studies were also suggested—an acknowledgement that there is still a lot of uncertainty about the biological processes involved in autism, in the brain as well as other organs.

Susan Mayor London

Managers manipulated waiting lists

A National Audit Office report has identified the NHS trusts where it says waiting lists have been inappropriately adjusted.

NHS chief executive Nigel Crisp has condemned the managers responsible and launched an action plan to meet recommendations for improvements detailed in the report.

The plan includes carrying out spot checks on hospital waiting list figures and publishing NHS consultant waiting times on the internet to enable patients to check them against actual experience. It also includes dismissal on grounds of gross misconduct of any manager found to have deliberately distorted waiting times.

The nine NHS trusts where inappropriate adjustments came to light were named as Barts and the London; Guy’s and St Thomas’s; Plymouth Hospitals; Redbridge Health Care; Salford Royal; South Warwickshire General; Stoke Mandeville; Surrey and Sussex Healthcare; and University College London Hospitals.

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Inappropriate Adjustments to NHS Waiting Lists; www.nao.gov.uk/publications/nao_reports/01-02/0102452.pdf

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