Trust faces sex discrimination claim

Five women consultant psychiatrists have launched a sex discrimination action against an NHS trust alleging that male consultants received pay deals worth up to £15 000 ($22 500) more than those offered to their female colleagues.

The case will centre around perks and pay enhancements offered by the Foundation NHS Trust, which has since become part of the South Staffordshire NHS Trust.

The women claim that the trust struck “sweetheart deals” with male consultants, offering them extra payments for working from home, making domiciliary visits, and taking on extra sessions that their female counterparts were conducting without payment.

The discrepancies first emerged last year when Dr Lisetta Lovett, a consultant in general adult psychiatry, sat on an interview panel during which a new male consultant was offered an enhanced pay deal. Dr Lovett then surveyed the trust’s 15 consultants and found that none of the five women consultants had received similar deals.

Owing to a backlog of employment tribunals, the case is not expected to be heard until July next year. South Staffordshire NHS Trust declined to comment on the case while the legal action was still pending.

Mark Hunter Leeds

Belgium gives terminally ill the right to die

Belgium is set to become the second country in the world to decriminalise euthanasia. The draft legislation was overwhelmingly approved by its upper house, the Senate, last week and is expected to be approved by its lower chamber before the end of the year.

Strict criteria will have to be met before a patient’s wish to end his or her life can be honoured. Patients will have to be aged over 18 years, be conscious, have an incurable illness, and have made voluntary and repeated requests to die.

Each case of euthanasia will have to be registered with a national committee, which will have eight doctors among its 16 members and will report periodically on the implementation of the new rules. Parallel legislation, which won almost unanimous support in the Senate, makes provision for improved palliative care.

A survey of doctors at the end of March showed that half had been asked to carry out euthanasia and that 42% would be prepared to do so under certain conditions.

Rory Watson Brussels

Condom most popular contraceptive for under 16s

Half the girls aged under 16 years who attended family planning clinics in 2000-1 chose to use the male condom as their primary method of contraception, and four out of 10 chose the contraceptive pill. Although many women now rely on their GPs for contraceptive services, a total of 1.3 million women and 80 000 men attended family planning clinics and Brook Advisory Centres (clinics specialising in services for young people) last year, Department of Health figures have shown. The clinics and centres were particularly popular among 16-19 year olds, with about a quarter of this age group attending.

The proportion of attenders of all ages using the contraceptive pill declined from 70% to 42% between 1975 and 2000-1, while the proportion using condoms rose from 6% to 35%.

Annabel Ferriman BMJ

India relies too heavily on screening for safe blood supply, conference told

Despite mandatory screening, most of the blood being supplied in India continues to be unsafe, a conference on hepatitis C organised by Runbaxy Science Foundation was told last week by a leading expert on blood transfusion.

“The changes that have been effected over the years have largely remained cosmetic,” said Dr Ambika Nanu, head of transfusion medicine at the All India Institute of Medical Sciences, New Delhi.

Screening of blood for HIV, hepatitis B and C, malaria, and syphilis was mandatory under Indian regulations, but this was not enough to guarantee safe supplies, she said.

Dr Nanu blamed the current policy of relying on screening alone to ensure a safe blood supply for the continuing crisis. The first steps to a safe blood transfusion service—a comprehensive national blood transfusion policy and a service with a well defined structure and based on

The report examined the critical issues facing local authorities and NHS bodies as they prepare to set up new scrutiny arrangements. Legislation in the Health and Social Care Act 2001 will give local authority overview and scrutiny committees the power to “call in” representatives of local NHS bodies for questioning. The government hopes that this will improve accountability and aid transparency.

Increasing the powers of scrutiny is one of several initiatives by the government to increase public involvement in the NHS. The overview and scrutiny committees will look at issues of local health, such as public health concerns or accessibility to health care.

Alex Vass London

Counselling services

The Audit Commission issued advice this week to local authorities, who are to have an expanded role in overseeing local health matters next year. The commission said that the expanded scrutiny role will “play a key role in improving local health and health services,” provided that “realistic aims and clear ground rules” are agreed.

The report’s details are available at www.audit-commission.gov.uk

Compiled by: Alex Vass

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