Photo diagnosis can cut waiting times for dermatology

Dermatology waiting times could be substantially reduced if GPs took instant photographs of their patients' visible symptoms and included them in referral letters.

When GPs were given cameras to take instant pictures of skin conditions, the number of patients needing to see a dermatologist was cut by 25%, a report in *Family Practice* says (2004;21:54-6).

And for more than 60% of patients who had a "photo diagnosis," a management plan was made without the patient needing an appointment with a specialist before diagnosis.

"This study shows that referrals which include instant photographs taken by a GP allow a dermatologist to advise appropriate management in more than 60% of cases without seeing the patient face-to-face," say the authors, from the departments of general practice, and epidemiology and public health at Queen's University and the department of dermatology, Royal Victoria Hospital, Belfast. Roger Dobson *Abergavenny*

Payments for operations will be standardised

The national tariff for clinical procedures in the NHS, published by the government last week, is too crude a system to be fair to all hospitals, the BMA has warned.

The price list for 48 common NHS operations is part of a bid to improve efficiency and tackle large variations between hospitals in costs. Under the tariff, to be rolled out nationally over the next four years, hospitals will receive a set cost from the primary care trust for procedures such as cataract, hip, and heart bypass operations. Hospitals that can provide services at a cost below the national tariff can use a proportion of the "profit" to improve services.

Health minister John Hutton said trusts that spend more than

the national tariff on procedures will be helped to drive down costs. But by the time the system is fully operational, in 2008, primary care trusts will be unable to pay above the tariff limits for services and could either search for providers elsewhere or leave the hospital to pick up the excess. Rebecca Coombes *London*

Gulf war syndrome case collapses

A compensation claim by more than 2000 British veterans over Gulf war syndrome has collapsed, because there is not enough scientific evidence to prove their case in court.

The Legal Services Commission, which faces a bill of around £4m (\$7.4m; €5.8m) for the eight year legal battle, is expected to withdraw legal aid this month. Taking the case to trial in the High Court would have cost taxpayers another £4m.

Although no final decision on funding has been taken, the veterans' lawyers—the current chairman of the bar, Stephen Irwin QC, and solicitor Patrick Allen, senior partner of the London firm Hodge, Jones & Allen—accept that the withdrawal of aid is inevitable.

British veterans of the Gulf war, who have been trying to sue the Ministry of Defence, have a range of health problems, including fatigue, headaches, cognitive disorders such as short term memory loss and loss of concentration, joint and muscle pain, post-traumatic stress disorder, alcohol misuse, sleep disturbance, skin rashes, and shortness of breath.

Possible causes that have been suggested include the effect of multiple vaccines on the immune system; tablets to guard against nerve agents; exposure to organophosphate insecticides; exposure to chemical or biological weapons; the effects of depleted uranium from munitions; and pollution from oil well fires.

But Hodge, Jones & Allen says in a briefing paper: "According to the worldwide scientific consensus, veterans' symptoms and health problems do not represent a Gulf War syndrome and do not have an identifiable cause."

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

Report accuses NHS of institutional racism

Mark Gould *London*

The Royal College of Psychiatrists has backed calls for the creation of a mental health "tsar" (national clinical director) for people from black and other ethnic minority groups, one of a series of recommendations in a leaked report into the death of David "Rocky" Bennett, a black patient in an NHS psychiatric unit.

The report, by retired judge Sir John Blofeld, took evidence from some of the most senior figures in psychiatry, including the mental health tsar, Louis Appleby, and was published this week after the *BMJ* went to press.

A leaked version seen by the *BMJ* paints a picture of institutional racism and discrimination in the NHS and private sector against psychiatric patients and staff from ethnic minority groups.

The report makes 22 recommendations to ensure that patients from ethnic minority groups get better treatment. These include recruiting more staff from these groups, more training in cultural sensitivity, care plans that include details of each patient's ethnic origin, and a three minute time limit on the use of restraint in the prone position.

It raised concerns about the reluctance among psychiatrists to diagnose schizophrenia and instead opt for "drug induced psychosis" in cases of Afro-Caribbean patients who were thought to use cannabis.

Mr Bennett, 38, who was being treated for schizophrenia, died after a struggle with nursing staff at a clinic in Norwich in 1998. An inquest heard that he was pinioned face down for over 28 minutes by up to five members of staff.

The Royal College of Psychiatrists has publicly stated its awareness of "institutional racism both within itself and in mental health services." It has been working with the centre for ethnicity and health at the University of Central Lancashire to ensure that psychiatrists get better training and to increase their awareness of discrimination. The college's president, Dr Mike Shooter, welcomed the leaked findings and said he "would wish to work closely" with an ethnic minority mental health tsar.

Other experts blame years of underfunding and mismanagement for inequalities. Richard Brook, the chief executive of the mental health charity Mind, said: "The lid needs to be lifted on what exactly is going on in our secure hospitals. A black mental health tsar will be useless unless the government acts to remedy the failings at the very heart of the mental health system."

And the independent health think tank the King's Fund found serious problems for ethnic minority patients in its 2003 report on mental health services. □

David "Rocky" Bennett died after a struggle with nursing staff in which he was pinioned face down for over 28 minutes