Adverse incidents in NHS are still under-reported

Adrian O'Dowd *London*

Under-reporting of adverse incidents and near misses is still a problem in the NHS and a barrier to improving patient safety, a new report says.

Almost a million patient safety incidents and near misses happened last year in England's NHS, but a fifth of incidents and two fifths of near misses are estimated to go unreported, it says.

The report, from the parliamentary public accounts committee, claims that the National Patient Safety Agency has failed so far in its five year existence to secure accurate information on serious incidents and deaths and to help the NHS learn from previous experience.

There were 974 000 patient safety incidents and near misses in 2004-5 recorded on NHS trusts' reporting systems. Trusts estimate that an average of 22% of incidents and 39% of near misses go unreported—mainly medication errors and incidents leading to serious harm.

The MPs investigating the issue found that doctors are less likely to report an incident than

other groups of staff and recommend that trusts evaluate their own levels of under-reporting and target specific training at those groups of staff that are less likely to report.

The Department of Health established the National Patient Safety Agency in July 2001 to collect and analyse information; assimilate other safety related information from a variety of existing reporting systems; learn lessons; and produce solutions.

A key target for the agency was to develop a national reporting system by December 2001. The national reporting and learning system was three years late in being linked to trusts' own reporting systems, and it overspent. In addition, the parallel, anonymous, electronic reporting system was only available from September 2004.

Edward Leigh, a Conservative MP and chairman of the committee, said of the recorded incidents, "These statistics would be terrifying enough without our learning that there is undoubtedly substantial under-

reporting of serious incidents and deaths. To top it all, the NHS simply has no idea how many people die each year from patient safety incidents.

"What this points to are two related and deep seated failures. One is the failure of the NHS to secure accurate information on serious incidents and deaths. The other is the failure on a staggering scale to learn from previous experience."

There has been some notable improvement at NHS trust level in developing a more open and fair reporting culture, the report says. However, under-

reporting of incidents remains a problem and trusts do not do enough to inform patients when something does go wrong. Only 24% of trusts routinely inform patients involved in a reported incident.

Insufficient progress has been made to achieve the department's plans to guarantee a safer NHS for patients, the report concludes.

The report, *A Safer Place for Patients: Learning to Improve Patient Safety*, is at www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/committee_of_public_accounts.cfm.

Healthcare group agrees \$500m settlement for unnecessary surgery

Jeanne Lenzer *New York*

The second largest health provider in the United States, Tenet Healthcare, has agreed to pay nearly \$500m (£270m; €390m) to settle claims that doctors did unnecessary surgery at the Redding Hospital, in Redding, California.

The hospital was raided by 40 agents from the Federal Bureau of Investigation in 2002 after it received reports that doctors were performing numerous unnecessary cardiac operations (*BMJ* 2002;325:1130).

The settlement was signed on 14 June and is the largest ever for unnecessary procedures and ends all civil and criminal actions arising out of the allegations.

In a separate settlement on 29 June, Tenet agreed to sell 11 hospitals and pay \$900m to resolve charges that they overcharged Medicare \$1.5bn.

One of the hospitals that Tenet undertook to sell is the well known Cleveland Clinic Hospital in Weston, Florida. Tenet, a for profit hospital com-

pany, bought up a number hospitals and non-profit healthcare organisations to become the second largest healthcare chain in the United States. Until recently, it owned and operated 73 hospitals, providing 18 445 hospital beds.

Tenet has denied wrongdoing and says certain "mistakes" in billing have now been corrected. Harry Anderson, a spokesman for Tenet, wrote in an email to the *BMJ*, "Since the Redding matter and other issues surfaced in October 2002, Tenet has significantly changed its management, business strategy, and corporate culture."

"We are a stronger and better company today. In fact, we are recognised as having the best

corporate governance among all the major healthcare companies, and recent statistics from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services show that clinical quality at Tenet hospitals, as measured on more than a dozen standard metrics, is the highest among all the investor owned hospital companies."

The 14 June "global settlement" resolves multiple claims, including civil suits by 769 patients and their survivors and claims by three whistleblowers, including those of a doctor at Redding and a patient who contacted the FBI.

Tenet will pay \$395m to settle the patients' civil suits, for an average payout of more than \$500 000 a patient.