Trusts make plans to relieve growing pressure on emergency services

By Jennifer Sprinks

Steps to ease pressure on emergency departments are being taken by hospitals after MPs warned care will be in crisis unless urgent action is taken.

The Commons health committee concluded last week that growing demand on A&E departments in England will make them unsustainable without swift and radical change.

The health committee said shortages of senior emergency staff, inadequate community and GP services, and the troubled launch of the non-emergency helpline 111 will lead to A&E departments struggling to cope with demand this winter.

NHS trusts are now taking measures to boost nurse staffing levels and prevent admissions to A&E.

Guy’s and St Thomas’ NHS Foundation Trust will recruit an additional six emergency nurse practitioners to its A&E department at the end of August in an effort to reduce waiting times. A trust spokesperson said the new staff will treat minor injuries and ailments to enable other emergency staff to care for patients with more serious conditions.

Wrightington, Wigan and Leigh NHS Foundation Trust plans to expand its alcohol nurse specialist team, which is based in its A&E department. The service it provides, currently run by three alcohol nurse specialists, aims to reduce the number of people repeatedly attending A&E with alcohol and drug-related conditions.

Trust nursing director Pauline Jones said: ‘Since developing the service, we have seen great improvements in patient experience and prevented unnecessary A&E admissions.’

NHS England is asking patients and healthcare professionals for their views on improving care as part of a review of emergency services in England by medical director Sir Bruce Keogh. The consultation ends on August 11.

Staffing levels

Meanwhile, Health Education England has created an emergency medicine taskforce to look at improving staffing in A&E departments and is due to report its findings next month.

RCN Emergency Care Association chair Janet Youd said more needs to be done to address nurse staffing levels, and criticised the Commons health committee’s focus on medical staffing.

‘Recruitment and retention is equally a problem with senior nurses,’ she said. ‘Many across the country are looking at how soon they can retire or go into advanced practice roles to work in less stressful environments.’

University of Wolverhampton senior lecturer and A&E practitioner Jim Bethel said more senior nurses are needed on shifts.

‘There are very few experienced band 6 and 7 nurses,’ he said. ‘But we have a bottom-heavy pile of newly qualified nurses, and they need a lot more support and are being left to sink or swim.’

Schoolchildren learn first aid skills

Nursing students from De Montfort University have been teaching schoolchildren basic first aid and skills to cope in an emergency.

The students ran the sessions at Stokes Wood Primary School in Leicester as part of the Injury Minimisation Programme for Schools, a national scheme that encourages children to take responsibility for managing their own safety. Pupils were taught how to treat cuts and burns, close wounds and help someone who is choking.

Helen Dunbar, senior lecturer at De Montfort’s school of nursing and midwifery, said: ‘I would love to incorporate sessions like this into the school curriculum so we can deliver workshops to more children.’

The British Red Cross has expressed concern that the draft national curriculum does not include first aid.

Nursing student Abigail Gilbert shows Summer Dalby and Connor Burt how to apply a plaster.