

11 April 2018

Dear colleague,

Sexual safety on mental health wards

On Friday 20 April, CQC will co-host a workshop with the National Mental Health Nurse Directors Forum to explore what can be done to improve sexual safety on mental health wards. We expect that more than 100 senior staff from NHS mental health trusts will participate in this. I wanted to explain why we are holding this event and share with you, at this early stage, some of the early findings that relate to this important issue.

What alerted us to this issue?

In our report, 'State of Care in Mental Health Services 2014-17' we said that 'a substantial number of services admitted both men and women to the same wards. When this is the case, staff have a heightened responsibility to ensure that patients are safe from sexual harassment and sexual violence'.

Last year, inspectors in one of our regional teams issued a requirement notice because a trust did not comply with the guidance on eliminating mixed sex accommodation¹. The trust was slow to act to begin with and, as part of their assessment of the impact of this breach, the inspectors looked at the patient safety incident reports that the trust had submitted through the National Reporting and Learning System (NRLS). They found a number of reports that described sexual incidents that took place on these wards. We required the trust to take the necessary action.

What work have we done to explore this issue further?

Our review of this trust prompted us to work with NHS Improvement to examine how other specialist mental health NHS trusts in England are reporting patient safety incidents of a sexual nature. As part of this, we analysed nearly 60,000 reports submitted to NRLS by trusts over a three month period. More than 900 of these reports related to sexual incidents on mental health wards. A number of these

¹Eliminating Mixed-Sex Accommodation. From the Chief Nursing Officer and Deputy NHS Chief Executive. 10 February 2011
https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/215773/dh_124233.pdf

appeared to describe incidents of sexual assault or harassment; with variation in how staff had categorised these incidents.

Next steps

As the quality regulator, our priority continues to be to ensure that people using healthcare services are kept safe and that their privacy and dignity are maintained.

We are working with NHS Improvement to better understand the reporting and categorisation of incident reports. Following our workshop on 20 April, we intend to publish a national briefing later in the year, which will outline our detailed findings from this review and make recommendations for the system.

While we carry out this important work, we encourage NHS trusts to review their incident reports and to consider what action they may need to take on an individual basis, as well as how they are ensuring the sexual safety of patients on their wards in general. This will extend beyond having regard for the national guidance on eliminating mixed sex hospital accommodation because some of the incidents reported to the NRLS appear to have taken place on same sex wards.

We thank trusts and our system partners in advance for engaging with us on this work and for their participation at the workshop.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Paul Lelliott
Deputy Chief Inspector of Hospitals (lead for mental health)