

bmj.com news roundup

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King's Fund calls for new relationship between NHS and government

A new agency should be set up to take over the government's role of setting targets and allocating funds in the NHS, leaving politicians free to concentrate on the bigger issues that have an impact on health, such as poverty, food, and housing, says a health think tank.

Steve Dewar, the health policy director at the King's Fund—an independent health charity—argues in a report that the current relationship between the NHS and government is too close. It encourages government to “meddle in” the day to day running of the health service instead of focusing on wider health policies.

Legislating for a new body to take the responsibility for setting and achieving improvement targets away from government would also benefit health authorities and NHS staff, he says. The relationship between the NHS and government would be more mature as there would be greater ownership of targets among staff as they would take part in setting them. Additionally, parliament would have greater ability to hold both the government and the NHS to account for their responsibilities. *Zosia Kmiotowicz London*

Government and the NHS: Time for a New Relationship? can be seen at www.kingsfund.org.uk/publications

NHS star rating system is misleading, statisticians say

Performance indicators that “name and shame” NHS organisations or individuals should be scrapped because they “demoralise and antagonise” staff and damage the health service as a whole, the Royal Statistical Society said in a report released last week.



Mental health images go on show

Shrunken, Amy Corcoran's photograph (above), is, she says, “an attempt to document some of the strong physical feelings (rarely described) of living with eating difficulties—sensations of weakness, emptiness, deflation, nausea, powerlessness, and insignificance.”

It is one of 120 works of art in the Art Works in Mental Health exhibition on show at the Royal College of Art, London, 10 am to 5 pm each day from 31 October to 16 November.

The works have been selected by a panel of artists and experts on mental health. After the show in London the exhibition will go on tour to Cardiff, Manchester, Edinburgh, and Birmingham.

Lynn Eaton London

See www.artworksinmentalhealth.co.uk

The society says that public sector employees and the public are suspicious of government performance statistics and see them as being used to meet political ends and as likely to be misrepresented by the media. The society wants the government to take a “much wider consideration of the ethics and cost-effectiveness of performance monitoring” and to look at alternatives.

Launching the report, Professor Sheila Bird, of the Medical Research Council's Biostatistics Unit, said the NHS's star ratings system was “in essence” misleading and called for a radical overhaul of performance monitoring.

She said that in spite of some good examples statistical standards had “largely been ignored” and that the criticism applied not just to target setting by the government but to the design, analysis, and media reporting of performance indicators.

Professor Bird said that when publishing league tables or star ratings the authors and the media should present the data in the context of measures of

uncertainty to “avoid over-interpretation and the false labelling of performance.”

Mark Gould London

Performance Indicators: The Good, the Bad and the Ugly is available at www.rss.org.uk

Freedoms of foundation hospitals do not go far enough

Foundation hospitals will have a “botched birth” because their freedoms will be too restricted, a leading economist told a conference in London last week. In yielding to political pressure to preserve the status quo, the government had missed an opportunity to create meaningful reforms, said Professor Meghnad Desai, director of the Centre for the Study of Global Governance at the London School of Economics.

Foundation hospitals should be allowed to borrow money,

form strategic alliances, and compete with one another, he told a conference of NHS and private sector managers, organised by the consultancy firm Laing & Buisson. He suggested that hospitals should be launched, merged, and closed if necessary, in response to local demand.

Genuine modernisation is being blocked because the NHS remains a political rather than a practical issue, he said. “Every MP thinks he is responsible for what happens in the NHS.”

Sections on foundation trusts in the Health and Social Care Bill are currently undergoing major amendment in the House of Lords, the former health minister Philip Hunt told the conference. The amendments would delay implementation by at least six months.

Colleen Shannon London

NHS criticised over suicide of mentally ill doctor

A psychiatric specialist registrar who killed herself and her 3 month old daughter during a psychotic episode had been systematically failed by the NHS, an inquiry by the North East London Strategic Health Authority concluded last week.

Daksha Emson, aged 34, had bipolar affective disorder. In October 2000 Dr Emson stabbed her daughter, Freya, then herself, and then doused both Freya and herself in an inflammable substance and set it alight. Both died. This tragedy could and should have been avoided had her considerable risk been assessed and appropriate action taken, says the report.

The report found that not only had she been failed by the NHS and received a “significantly poorer standard of care than that which her own patients might have expected,” but that her death was in part caused by the deep prejudices against people with mental illness who work in the NHS.

Throughout her postgraduate training, Dr Emson went to “considerable lengths” to conceal her illness from her