Pressures on acute paediatric services revealed as children’s doctors warn health services ‘cannot continue in present form’

Over three quarters of children see a senior paediatrician within four hours of admission, but there remains a shortage of consultants at peak times, according to the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health’s Back to Facing the Future report, launched today.

Back to Facing the Future presents the results of the RCPCH’s audit of acute paediatric units in the UK against the 10 minimum standards set out by the College in its bold blueprint: Facing the Future 2 years ago. The standards include: every child admitted to a paediatric department with an acute medical problem to be seen by a senior paediatrician within four hours of admission, at least one medical handover in every 24 hours led by a paediatric consultant, and specialist paediatricians are available for immediate telephone advice about acute problems for all specialities and for all paediatricians.

Whilst some standards are being met by the majority of units, others are falling short – and the RCPCH is warning that the current configuration of services is putting children’s health services at risk and is unsustainable.

Back to Facing the Future finds:

- Over three quarters (77%) of children see a paediatrician on middle or consultant grade rotas within four hours of admission – just under a quarter do not.

- 88% of children or young people admitted to a paediatric department with an acute medical problem are seen by a consultant paediatrician (or equivalent) within the first 24 hours.
• There is a disparity between care delivered during the day – just 11%[1] of units (26%[2] self-reported peak times) had a presence during the evening. During peak times at weekends, consultant presence was just 6% of units (20% self-reported peak times).

• Immediate telephone advice is not always available across some specialties – and arrangements are often informal.

• There is a shortfall of staff across all rotas when measured against the Facing the Future standards.

Dr Hilary Cass, President of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, said:

“These standards have gained a great deal of currency within the paediatric community and it’s encouraging that many units are meeting the standards well. There are countless examples of paediatricians going beyond the call of duty to deliver out of hours care – and it is thanks to the diligence and dedication of these doctors that most of the standards are being met and the level of healthcare delivered to children remains high.

“But perhaps the most concerning area is the consultant presence at times of peak activity. When units are at their busiest, it’s crucial that the most experience and skilled members of the team are present – and currently this isn’t happening in too many services.

“Acute paediatricians are under significant pressure within the current structures and we have to be prepared to re-examine the way in which we deliver care because this way of working is not sustainable.”

The Audit found that some units treated the standards as the ‘bare minimum’ for service provision while others picked standards that they felt were more applicable to their unit than others rather than attempting to meet all 10. Often this was due to resources being spread too thinly.

Dr Cass continued:

“There are too many units in the UK to provide a safe and sustainable service; health services can’t continue in their current form. Reconfiguration needs to happen to deliver the best possible care to children and young people. We also need to look at more innovative models of service provision, providing more care in the community. But it’s going to take bold and brave leadership to make it happen.”

Ends.

For further information, comments or interviews with RCPCH President Dr Hilary Cass, please contact: Melissa Milner melissa.milner@rcpch.ac.uk / 020 7092 6005 / 07837 973 413.

PDFs of Back to Facing the Future and the original Facing the Future report is available to download at: http://www.rcpch.ac.uk/child-health/standards-care/health-policy/facing-future/facing-future

The report is being launched at the RCPCH’s Child Health in the UK | The Future conference, taking place on 11-12 April in Manchester
About the Back to Facing the Future Audit

The audit was carried out over the summer and autumn of 2012 in two stages. The first stage was a survey of all UK acute paediatric units which consisted of a questionnaire and a retrospective case note audit. The second stage consisted of a series of site visits and in-depth interviews with clinical directors, trainees and nurse/ward managers.

[1] Based on Facing the Future defined ‘peak times’ of between 5-10pm
[2] Based on unit’s own definition of peak times