Forensic and Secure Environments Committee – ARM report 2021

The Forensic and Secure Environments Committee represents members who provide healthcare to patients in the criminal justice system or other detention settings, death certification and coronial settings across the UK.

The COVID-19 pandemic has, as with many other committees across the BMA, significantly limited the scope of FSEC’s work in the 2020-21 session. The ability to meet to discuss the issues affecting doctors under the committee’s remit is greatly missed, particularly as the often sensitive and complicated problems these doctors face benefit from face to face, open discussion. Regardless, the committee has continued to champion the issues facing doctors working in some of the most challenging environments across the UK.

Over the 2020-21 session, the committee experienced some challenges including turn over in staff, and we hope that staffing remains in place going forward. We appreciate all the hard work from all the secretariat who have worked with the committee over the session.

COVID-19 and secure environments

The pandemic has continued to be detrimental to patients within the criminal justice and detention system in the UK. The inability to effectively implement infection control measures in some settings, outbreaks of the disease among staff and inmates and the roll-out of the vaccination programme have dominated the concerns of members. While the vaccine has brought some protection to staff and inmates, the decision to maintain priority groups for the roll-out among the prison population has been strongly criticised by the committee. Additionally, many privately employed and sub-contracted healthcare staff working in police custody in England and Wales did not receive the vaccine at the same time as their NHS colleagues. The inherent close-contact nature of prisons and detainment centres meant this approach by the government was not appropriate and was greatly opposed by FSEC.

The increasing prevalence of mental health issues among prisoners and detainees comes as no shock to the committee. The pandemic has increased pressure and tensions in secure environments, heightened feelings of uncertainty and reduced contact with the outside world. Not only has the pandemic affected our inmates and patients, it has increased stress for our members. The committee has discussed how to support doctors working in challenging environments and intends on offering practical advice via a conference in February 2022.

Medical examiner system

The long-awaited medical examiner system has been an issue for FSEC for a considerable time, but the announcement in June that the system would be extended to include all non-coronial deaths in England was a shock, nonetheless. FSEC will be working with other teams across the BMA, to lend its expertise on the medical examiner system and challenge the government’s decision to hastily introduce such a drastic change to death certification in England.

FSEC continues to support crematorium medical referees to prepare for the final stages of the implementation of the medical examiner system in their line of work. The past ten years has been a difficult and uncertain time for CMRs, and the committee and the BMA has attempted time and again to encourage the Government to be responsive to the needs of the CMRs as their role is dissolved. The long-term involvement of the CMRs in the transfer to the medical examiner system has provided FSEC with invaluable experience in this area, which we hope will be useful in addressing this most recent development in general practice.

Tissues retention – blocks and slides

The committee has been responding to the ARM motion introduced in 2019 on the retention of tissue taken at autopsy and has been investigating, with the Ethics and Human Right team, how to influence policy change on the retention of blocks and slides. To this end, FSEC representatives will be taking part in a roundtable event with the Human Tissue Authority in the Autumn to discuss how to introduce measures which will increase rates of families giving consent for the retention of tissue.

Management of drug misuse

FSEC continues to address the endemic misuse of drugs while in secure settings. For this reason, FSEC have submitted three motions for the ARM to consider, one of the most pressing is regarding monthly injectable prolonged release buprenorphine, which has been successful in its rollout in Scotland and Wales early in the COVID-19 pandemic. We hope to work with stakeholders going further to reduce harmful substance abuse in secure settings.

FSEC Conference February 2022

FSEC is pleased to be planning a face-to-face conference for doctors in secure environments for February 2022. The conference will cover selfcare for doctors working in challenging environments, inviting speakers with expertise in this area and providing workshops which will enable attendees to assess and better their workplace experience.