

Sexual safety on mental health wards

In 2017, following concerns raised on an inspection of a mental health trust, we carried out a review of reports on patient safety incidents that staff had submitted through the NHS National Reporting and Learning System. We found that many reports described sexual safety incidents, including sexual assault and harassment.

We decided to look at how often other mental health trusts in England report sexual incidents. We spoke with providers, people who use services and voluntary and charity sector stakeholders and found that sexual safety is still a major issue in mental health services.

Our report, *Sexual safety on mental health wards*, outlines the findings of our review and makes recommendations on what needs to happen to improve the sexual safety of people who use services.

What providers and people who use services told us:

1. Clinical leaders of mental health services do not always know the best ways to promote the sexual safety of people using services and of their staff.
2. Many staff do not have the skills to respond appropriately to incidents.
3. It is likely incidents are under-reported and reports may not reflect the true impact on the person who is affected.

4. People who use services do not always feel that they are kept safe from unwanted sexual behaviour.
5. The ward environment does not always promote the sexual safety of people using the service.
6. Joint-working with other agencies such as the police does not always work well in practice.

People need to be kept safe and their privacy and dignity should be maintained at a time that, for many, is the most vulnerable point in their lives. We encourage providers, commissioners and improvement organisations to work together and take the following actions to improve the sexual safety of people who use services:

- The health and social care system must provide co-produced guidance to enable everyone who delivers mental health services to do the right thing about sexual safety.
- Staff should be given the right training to enable them to put in place new national guidance for managing sexual safety incidents. Leaders must also encourage staff to have open conversations about sexual safety with people who use services.
- Providers, stakeholders, staff, people who use services, the police and safeguarding teams should work together on the approach to sexual safety incidents to make sure that disclosures are taken seriously and given the attention and sensitivity they deserve.

You can help CQC to find out where care needs to improve. You can tell us what things are like in your area by telling us about your experiences of health care – both good and bad – so we can take action to make sure that services improve.

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