

UK surgeons may undergo performance review every five years

Susan Mayor, *BMJ*

Surgeons should undergo professional review every five years and consultants' independent practitioner status should be revised, according to recommendations made last week by the Senate of Surgery of Great Britain and Ireland.

The recommendations came in response to the General Medical Council's determination on the abnormally high death rate among babies undergoing heart surgery at the Bristol Royal Infirmary between 1988 and 1995 (27 June, p 1924). The senate—which represents the surgical royal colleges of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland—has suggested sweeping changes within the profession to restore public confidence but has emphasised that self regulation is the key to improving standards without further lowering of surgeons' morale.

Barry Jackson, president of the Royal College of Surgeons of England, said: "We are experiencing a cultural earthquake in the profession. We recognise that there is a problem that needs to be addressed." However, he pointed out: "We would like to stress that more than four million surgical operations a year are carried out in this coun-

try, and the overwhelming majority are carried out to a very high level with complete satisfaction to patients and very successful outcomes."

The senate has recommended that mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that standards in surgery remain high throughout the entire country. Tony Giddings, chairman of the Federation of Surgical Specialists Association, explained: "Most importantly, methods of revalidation should be established for consultants. We also need more effective monitoring systems for surgeons embarking on new procedures and greater team working." The senate suggested regular professional review—with surgeons being reassessed by their peers every five years, similar to the system used in the United States.

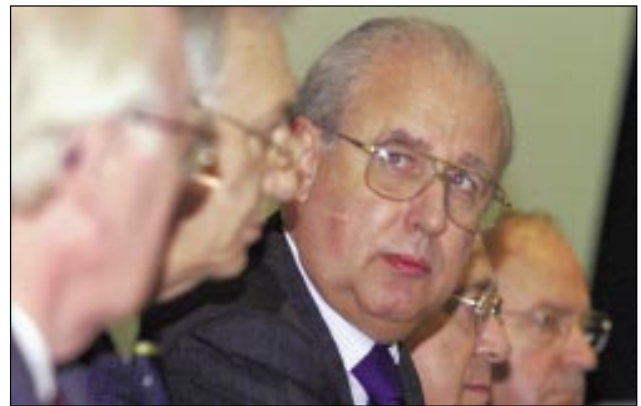
Senate members also proposed a change in consultants' contracts. Consultants are currently contracted as independent practitioners. Mr Giddings explained: "This was appropriate when surgeons had general skills. But it is not appropriate for the specialised procedures carried out today, which require surgeons to work as members of a team." He emphasised that the

senate wished to preserve the capacity for surgeons to act independently and to innovate but that contracts should reflect their roles within teams.

Further recommendations included national systems of recording activity and outcome data, a "rapid response" team to assess situations in which it has been suggested that patients' safety may be at risk, and more rigorous assessment of surgical trainees. The senate noted that funding will be required to implement all of the proposals, but members predicted that the government will provide the

necessary resources because of the current concern raised by events such as the Bristol case.

The BMA gave its full backing to the proposals. Dr Peter Hawker, chairman of the BMA's consultants committee, said: "These are important initiatives which will strengthen the efforts being made by the whole profession to make sure that patient safety is protected and that problems are detected early. Better data on outcomes and the ability to compare results with colleagues around the country are absolutely essential if we are to make real progress." □



Barry Jackson of the Royal College of Surgeons and other senate members have recommended regular professional reviews

Expert team to investigate concerns at Scottish hospital

Bryan Christie, *Edinburgh*

The UK government has ordered an expert medical team to be sent in to Glasgow's Victoria Infirmary to examine what improvements can be made after public concern about the quality of treatment.

Scotland's health minister, Sam Galbraith, announced the

move on the same day as the UK Senate of Surgery recommended the establishment of "rapid response" teams to investigate concerns over patients' safety. It is the first time that such a team has been sent in to a Scottish hospital and is being seen as a clear example of the

government's determination to act on clinical standards.

Although Mr Galbraith said that he wanted the team to examine where improvements can be made, he emphasised that the hospital still had his support.

The standards of medical treatment at the Victoria Infirmary were criticised during a recent murder trial relating to the death of 15 year old Imran Khan. He was taken to the hospital with a stab wound but died eight days later from multiorgan failure brought on by blood poi-

soning. The defence counsel at the trial said that the blood poisoning was caused by a drain being pushed into his chest and blamed his death on medical negligence. The accused was found guilty of the lesser charge of attempted murder. At the end of the trial, the dead boy's family joined calls for a public inquiry to be held into the care he received at the hospital. Since then, a number of other cases have been highlighted in the media involving allegations of poor treatment at the Victoria. □