NEWS

Staff shortages and lack of data continue to blight England's NHS and care regulator

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England's regulator of health and adult social care services is understaffed and lacks the information it needs to monitor adult social care or its own performance, the public spending watchdog has said.

It is still not known how efficient or effective the Care Quality Commission is or what the organisation's effect is on the quality of care, the National Audit office has said in its new report.[1]

The CQC was set up in 2008 to combine the responsibilities of three existing inspectorates, but it was widely criticised in 2011 and 2012 by various bodies, including the National Audit Office, the House of Commons Public Accounts Committee, and the Department of Health, for poor strategic direction and leadership, insufficient skills and capacity, and failure to intervene quickly or strongly enough when care providers were failing. A shortage of inspectors meant that inspections were not carried out, and CQC staff complained of bullying and harassment.[2 3]

Since then the CQC has made substantial changes to its structure and leadership and strengthened the way it expects to monitor and inspect hospitals, providers of adult care, and GPs. However, it did not yet know what its workload would be because it had inspected only 9% of providers and did not know how many providers would need to be re-inspected, said the report.

The CQC has also been given new responsibilities to oversee the financial sustainability of the largest providers of adult social care from April 2015 and the financial efficiency of hospital trusts from June 2015, before it has had time to finish implementing its new strategy.

The CQC regulated 49 632 locations, at a cost of £211m (€305m; $320m), in 2014-15, but its staff was still not big enough to fulfil its role, said the latest report. Although it employed 2681 full time equivalent staff, 34% of inspector posts were currently unfilled, it said. Even with a full complement of staff, a third of the staff will have been in post for less than 12 months. Extra responsibilities meant that the agency must also find new staff to deliver its extra briefs, said the report.

Many processes were wasteful, the report said. The commission processed 81 840 applications to add or change registrations in 2014-15, but 48% were returned, not required, or withdrawn, wasting time and money. In 1700 cases the applicants used the wrong form.

Amyas Morse, head of the National Audit Office, said today, "The commission has made substantial progress in the face of sustained criticism and is developing a more intelligence driven approach to regulation.

"Further challenges lie ahead for the commission to demonstrate, in practice, effectiveness and value for money. It now needs to build an organisational culture that gives its people the confidence, as well as the skills, to apply the regulatory model assertively, fairly, and consistently."

David Behan, the CQC's chief executive, said that the new inspection model had necessitated significant time to work with new partners and investment in new staff. "We know we are not at the end of this journey and that there is more to be done," he said. "In particular, recruiting, training, and supporting our staff is a key priority of ours, as is a complete overhaul of our registration process for providers, to improve its efficiency and overall experience."

1   National Audit Office. Care Quality Commission: capacity and capability to regulate the quality and safety of health and adult social care. Jul 2015. www.nao.org.uk/report/capacity-and-capability-to-regulate-the-quality-and-safety-of-health-and-adult-social-care.
2   Dyer C. Care Quality Commission cuts inspections to meet deadlines for registration. *BMJ* 2011;343:d7873.
3   Limb M. Staff at NHS regulator are left "broken" by culture of bullying. *BMJ* 2013;347:f4801.

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