

TREASURER

NHS CIRCULAR NO 1976(GEN) 80



Scottish Home and Health Department
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Telephone-031-556 8501 ext 2275

Your reference

Health Board Secretaries

Our reference

NFG/3/2
Date

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Dear Sir

CONTROL OF LINEN SUPPLIES

1. The report of a study group on the amount of nursing time devoted to clerical procedures in connection with supplies and services at ward level was issued to hospitals under cover of SHM 38/1964. The study established that the bulk of clerical work done by nurses arose out of the handling of linen returned from the laundry and the maintenance of linen inventories. In the light of this report, a revised system for the control and movement of linen was suggested including the introduction of a topping up system for the issue of linen to wards and departments and the discontinuance of inventories of linen. This system (paragraph 7 of SHM 38/1964) is reproduced as an appendix to this Circular.

2. SHM 38/1964 also stressed (paragraphs 4, 8 and 9) the importance of physical security to minimise losses of linen.

3. Information reaching the Department suggests that unexplained losses of linen are reaching an unacceptable level in some hospitals. This is a matter for concern, and if there are similar though unidentified losses generally, the situation is really serious. In this connection, attention is drawn to the general principles outlined in NHS Circular No 1976 (GEN)16: Use of Resources in the National Health Service.

Security

4. Boards should therefore arrange for security measures over linen supplies to be reviewed at all hospitals. There is no suggestion - at least at this stage - that the practice of maintaining ward inventories should be re-introduced, since these were very expensive in staff time and were only partially successful in keeping losses down.

5. The arrangements for preventing (as distinct from detecting) losses of linen must depend very much on local circumstances. It is suggested however that measures which might be considered, if they have not already been put into practice, include the following:-

- (a) supplies in transit to and from laundries not to be left where unauthorised access to them is easy.

(b) a system of receipts (eg using suitable books) for staff such as van drivers handling supplies in transit. (It is acknowledged that this can only cover items in bulk, such as the number of bags despatched or delivered).

(c) more care to prevent linen being sent to incinerators for disposal. (It is inferred that this is happening from the amount of disposable items which arrive in bags at the laundry).

(d) improved management and supervision to prevent the use of linen for cleaning purposes.

(e) close control of condemnation procedures - eg to prevent an unserviceable item being torn into two pieces, so that two items are issued in replacement.

(f) marking of linen. See SHM 38/1964, paragraph 3(b). This is still regarded as a useful deterrent to theft. Inter-Weaving, is, however, no longer commended; it reduces the wearing qualities of the linen, is probably slightly more costly, and its value as a deterrent to theft is reduced by the fact that "seconds" or "rejects" can be legitimately bought on the open market. The guidance in the relevant Public Authority Standard (PS17: 1974) is: "Each item shall be distinctly marked as directed by the purchasing authority using black ink complying with the requirements of BS2726. Sheeting shall have a drop ticket attached to each piece. Sheets and draw-sheets shall be marked near the corner; pillow-slips on the inside of the flap". A permanent marking device such as the Di-mark system, whereby a mark is imprinted on the article and then oxidised to give permanence, should be considered.

(g) the use of colours, designs etc which are likely to make linen less attractive to a private user.

Identification of Unexplained Linen Losses

6. Arrangements should be made at every hospital for a check to be kept on issues of linen which are made other than to cover replacement of condemned items or an increased requirement due to some expansion of services. Issues otherwise required must be regarded as making good unexplained losses; and where such losses exceed an acceptable level, they should immediately be investigated. For this purpose, generally, a loss at a rate of more than 5% per annum of the current value of linen in use should be regarded as unacceptable.

Investigation

7. As with security arrangements, it is for local management to decide how an investigation of unexplained losses should be carried out. Some wards or departments may suggest themselves as being particularly vulnerable; some items (eg downies, pastel and candy-striped sheets etc) may be particularly attractive to the potential thief. Investigation might concentrate in the first place on areas such as these.

8. Boards should not hesitate to invite the assistance of the police in cases where there is strong evidence of substantial theft or pilfering of linen.

Advice

9. Boards are reminded that the Laundry Adviser in the Common Services Agency is prepared to advise on security and investigation procedures.

General Points

10. On this difficult topic the Department would be very glad to know of any points which Boards feel might be of general interest, or could be included in further guidance; for example further suggestions as to measures which might be taken to reduce losses, or comment as to the success of measures set out in this circular.

Yours faithfully

W A Strain

W A STRAIN

EXTRACT FROM SHM 38/1964

7. The following suggests a system by which issues to wards and departments might be made:-

(a) an estimate should be made of the stock essential for the ward or department and of the rate of replacement that has been experienced over recent months. This stock should be agreed after consultation with the ward sister or head of department and should be of such a level that stock piling other than any official ward store is unnecessary.

(b) if, for example, through a change of function or abnormal situation the stock requires to be increased, the additional items should be separately indented: similarly on any reduction in stock requirements the surplus items should be returned.

(c) responsibility for the hospital stores and for authorising issues therefrom should be clearly allocated to the appropriate administrative officer.

(d) a ward store should be available containing an agreed stock of items from which ward staff can draw their requirements. Adequate storage accommodation should be provided as far as practicable of a common type. The number of persons having access to these stores should be restricted.

(e) the stores should be topped up to the agreed level at regular intervals.

(f) the hospital secretary, in co-operation with senior nursing staff, should from time to time visit wards to ensure that the system is operating satisfactorily and that linen is not being held elsewhere than in the authorised storage accommodation.

(g) the hospital secretary should watch the level of issue to each ward or department with reference to the previous level of issues. Any increasing level of issue or variations between similar wards should be investigated. Any shortages or damage disclosed (other than those due to normal wear and tear) must be treated as a loss.