



Warding off crime

Hospitals suffer from the full range of criminal behaviour. John Dean reports on how one hospital Trust is dealing with the problem.

Assaults, theft and vandalism: it's a demanding beat which presents just about every challenge possible for a police officer. But what makes this different is it all takes place in hospital. Now, Northumbria Police's recognition of the need for a dedicated officer to tackle such incidents is reaping rewards. Crime figures show a drop from 101 offences in 2004, to 78 the following year, 56 the one after and just 17 for the year 2006/7.

The post of neighbourhood beat manager for Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust was created six years ago and for the past three years, the job has been done by PC Paul Colborn. The community he serves is a large one, including 6,000 staff and 20,000 people who use Trust facilities daily in the Gateshead area. "It is like a small town," says PC Colborn.

His beat is three hospitals, including Queen Elizabeth, where he is



Photography: Gilbert Johnston

Photography: Top: © Simon Clay/Alamy



based, as well as other Trust premises in the town.

His working hours shadow one of the reliefs in the town, which means he can end up dealing with everything

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from late-night incidents in accident and emergency or problems during the day. When he is not on-duty, officers from the town attend.

PC Colborn has developed close relationships with the staff in the many departments and has become heavily involved in prevention work.

He says his job is wider than simply reacting to violence in accident and emergency departments.

“People tend to think of accident and emergency on a Friday and Saturday night. Yes, we do have the odd drunk, but I also deal with disturbed patients. In fact, a number of our assaults on staff involve elderly or confused patients, who may become aggressive. Dealing with them requires insight and diplomacy,” he says.

The crimes reported in the past year underline the variety of the work and include theft, public order, criminal damage, burglary and vehicle crime. Offences in all categories are coming down and the figure of 17 was the lowest on record for the Trust.

For PC Colborn, it is important that people realise that they cannot get away with criminal or anti-social behaviour at hospitals, that they are not victimless crimes.

One example was a 28-year-old drunken man who vandalised a door, light-fitting and shelf in the treatment room. He was arrested by Northumbria police officers and appeared at Gateshead Magistrates Court in November last year, where he

was convicted of criminal damage. Magistrates gave the man a 12-month conditional discharge and ordered him to pay £300 compensation.

It was the twentieth such prosecution last year. Fifteen were given a mixture of fixed penalty notices and court convictions, including conditional discharges, community service orders and fines.

PC Paul Colborn says: “These cases do not always make headlines, but we feel, it is important that the victims know that the person who caused trouble was taken to court and that action was taken against them. If we then go back to the staff member and tell them that, they feel reassured.” Supporting that is the card system for people misbehaving on NHS property. A red card, which is relatively rare, means a person cannot go back to the hospital whereas a yellow card is a final warning.

PC Colborn delivers the card in person to stress the severity of their actions. He cites one case where a man was arrested for being drunk and disorderly, leaving one of the three nurses who attempted to treat him traumatised by his behaviour.

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Bottom left: PC Colborn has helped reduce crime for Gateshead Health NHS Foundation Trust
Bottom right: Caught on camera: an offender is detained in the hospitals grounds



Photography: Gilbert Johnston



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Building trust: PC Colborn talks to patients and staff on his beat

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drunkenness on others and broke down in front of me. “It was obvious that his remorse was genuine and he asked that his apologies be given to the nursing staff, particularly the one who had been traumatised. When I gave that feedback, she found it reassuring and said it gave her a sense of closure.” “The man has since been back to the accident and emergency department and has behaved well and shown respect to all staff. What we are doing is about the punitive side of things, but we also try to educate where we can.”

That education also includes crime prevention sessions with staff on subjects as varied as keeping their personal possessions hidden to avoid theft, securing drugs stores and personal safety.

But for all the preventative work, sometimes it is the tough line that works best. In one case, a man threatened to stab on-site security guards after they went to investigate reports of disorderly behaviour. He

was arrested and, after spending five weeks in custody, was sent to prison for 67 days for the attack.

PC Colborn says: “The sentence sends out a strong message to those who act in an anti-social manner on Trust property.”

Allan Smith, director of operations for the trust, believes the benefits are not just within NHS sites, but with people living nearby as well.

“PC Colborn has given us a huge link with people in the community around us. It is part of being a good neighbour and he gives us a link with residents. The local residents’ association is happy to have a police officer in their neck of the woods.”

He says that PC Colborn’s work establishing initiatives such as a Hospital Watch scheme and holding surgeries has also helped reassure staff.

“He has built up a reputation as someone you can go to talk to. We are really pleased with the way things have gone, it has been a huge success.”

“The man appeared before magistrates the following day after being held overnight and was fined £60. He was issued with a yellow card and I visited him at his home. He acknowledged he had a problem with alcohol and that he been before the courts on many occasions. He had never been confronted about the impact of his