Making out-of-network transfers less problematic

Written by Alan Hay

Anyone who has spent time in a NICU will be familiar with the frustrations and complexities of arranging emergency transfers, and we have all witnessed the media scrum that attends what is perceived to be a long-distance transfer. Various attempts had been made across the regions to develop cot-locating bureaux according to a variety of models and with differing degrees of success, when in early 2006 the DH sponsored the Cotlocator initiative, aimed specifically at developing a web-based solution to address the problem of long-distance transfers.

A project team with representation from First Response Agency (FRA) in Birmingham, Emergency Bed Service (EBS) in London, Senior Neonatologists, Network Managers and Neonatal Transfer Managers was assembled. It was agreed that the service would be provided by FRA in the Midlands and the North, and by EBS in the South of England, both of whom already had extensive expertise in providing local and national bed availability information across the range of critical care.

The service provides telephone advice on the location of the nearest available NICU cot in a level three unit nationally. It is important to stress that the purpose of the service is to help in those circumstances where no local solution can be found. It certainly should not take the place of whatever arrangements exist within the network to contain transfer activity in line with national targets. Only when the search for a cot necessarily extends beyond the familiar local area should the call be made to Cotlocator, ensuring that any long-distance transfer can be planned against a context of accurate, up-to-date and geographically correct information. The service is effectively free to callers. Initial start-up costs were met by the DH, and running costs are being met out of the host organisations' existing budgets.

Professor Neil Marlow, of Queen's Medical Centre, Nottingham, said sometimes his colleagues had to phone 20 units to find a space for a baby.

"I think this will be really helpful. Also, as a secondary benefit, we will be able, for the first time, to have a look at how often cots are closed throughout the UK."

Although the service makes use of web technology, the integrity of its information is still underwritten by personal contact. Operational staff in both sectors conduct a ring-round twice daily to collect information about the availability of NICU cots in those units designated as lead centres, and use that information to update a website which graphically displays the units' availability on an interactive map.

There are various degrees of access to the information. It's envisaged in the future that access will be handled by the network managers, but currently only the project leads at the two sectors are able to create logins. Access to the dynamic cot availability information is restricted to those operators dealing with enquiries, but access to static information, unit contact details, lists of specialisms etc are more widely available.

Health minister Ivan Lewis speaking at the November 2006 launch of the service at Birmingham Heartlands, said:

"On the occasions when a suitable cot is needed outside of the local network, a call to the National Neonatal Cot Locator will provide immediate up-to-date information about more distant options, making sure that these transfers can happen quickly, are effectively planned and can go as smoothly as possible.

"This will make a real difference to families and professionals seeking to ensure that babies and parents get the best possible care in usually very challenging circumstances."

The Cotlocator service is available 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. Enquiries should be made to your local centre: First Response Agency for calls from the Midlands and further north, Emergency Bed service for calls from the southern half of the country.

> **Requests for further details or for an information pack should be made to Alan Hay at EBS on 020 7407 7181 or Agnes Young at FRA on 01384 215666. The website address is: nww.cotlocator.nhs.uk**