AAGBI and GAT Committee statement in response to doctor fatigue reports on the BBC’s The One Show and Inside Out South

23 January 2017

In response to tonight’s reports on the BBC’s The One Show and Inside Out South about doctors driving home after nightshifts, the Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland (AAGBI) and its committee representing trainee anaesthetist doctors – the Group of Anaesthetists in Training (GAT) – are encouraged to hear about the work done by Dr Farquhar (Sleep Medicine Consultant) and his colleagues at Evelina London Children’s Hospital to educate doctors working in paediatrics about the important issue of fatigue.

We are concerned about the dangers of doctors driving home after a night shift and welcome this issue being highlighted in the media. We call for NHS employers to ensure that there is easy access to appropriate rest facilities to allow staff to take short naps, where clinically appropriate, during a night shift and also to ensure that anyone needing to rest before driving home is able to do so.

Anaesthetists are a vital part of the 24/7 urgent and emergency hospital care for patients in the operating theatres, intensive care units, delivery suites, emergency departments and wards; making critical decisions about patients and performing complex procedures. Along with other emergency care providers, anaesthetists regularly work night shifts. For safe working, it is crucial that these staff are aware of the risks of fatigue and are able to mitigate these risks by taking short rest breaks and sleeping before driving home.

In 2004 the AAGBI published the Fatigue and Anaesthetists guideline, reviewed and updated in 2013. This guideline defines fatigue, its causes and risks and suggests strategies to reduce these. In 2006, the Royal College of Physicians of London published guidance for junior doctors working night shifts and last year, there were several articles published in leading journals discussing the risks of shift work. Despite the availability of this guidance, there is still a need to improve the culture around fatigue in healthcare workers. The AAGBI and GAT have set up a working party to establish ways to work with doctors and departments/hospitals to address this.

The working party has supported and promoted a national survey of anaesthetic junior doctors on this
subject. The results from a pilot survey were striking; 60% of respondents said they had either had an accident or near miss when driving home after a night shift and only 36% reported the existence of post on call rest facilities in their hospital. The full survey closed at the end of 2016 with over 2200 responses, and the results will be available later this year. The results reported by Doctors.net.uk suggest similar problems facing the doctors completing their survey.

However, defining the problem is only the beginning. We need solutions. The AAGBI and GAT, in conjunction with the Royal College of Anaesthetists, are working on an education package for anaesthetic departments to ensure that doctors are aware of the risks of fatigue and how they can reduce these. We want to work with departments and hospitals to work out ways to provide the change in culture and the rest facilities that are urgently needed.

Ends

Notes to Editors
For further information and interview opportunities please contact Stephanie Addington, Marketing and Communications Manager, AAGBI by telephone +44 (0) 20 7631 8854 or email stephanieaddington@aagbi.org.

About the Association of Anaesthetists of Great Britain and Ireland (AAGBI)
The AAGBI is the professional membership organisation for over 11,000 anaesthetists in the UK and Ireland. AAGBI promotes patient care and safety, and advances anaesthesia through education, publications, research and international work, as well as the professional aspects of the specialty. The AAGBI’s motto in somno securitas (safe in sleep) encapsulates the major focus of the AAGBI: safety in anaesthesia. See www.aagbi.org.

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