

Mental Health - secure vehicles

Dear Malcolm

The Patients Forum submitted a question to a recent Board meeting expressing concern about the use of "secure" transport of patients with mental health problems; this was passed to the Quality Committee of the Trust Board. Your question has led to a review of the London Ambulance Service arrangements for the transfer of these patients with mental health problems.

These are planned transfers, usually from one mental health facility to another, and many are managed in standard PTS vehicles. If a secure transfer is requested by the Mental Health Trust then PTS staff will discuss this with the referring unit and can also assess the patient on arrival. By this we aim to ensure that secure transport is not used except when necessary.

There will always be a small number of patients who require secure transport either because they are violent or for their own protection. The number is small (average 50/month though this seems to be increasing) and not enough currently to justify the service purchasing its own vehicle. We therefore subcontract this service to an outside provider using a vehicle that meets strict specifications. These include a two man cell of suitable materials and a centre section with normal manufacturers seating for compliant patients (with a mesh bulkhead separating these seats from the driver). The cell is separated by a clear panel which allows communication and observation and the cell can be accessed from within the vehicle. The external side windows are opaque and there is no marking to indicate the purpose of the vehicle. It is very different from a police van.

The Quality Committee felt reassured that these patients are being managed in a way which, as far as possible, preserves their dignity and comfort and avoids the stigma of being in a police "cage" while still ensuring that the transfer is secure and safe for both the patient and staff.

I must emphasise that these are planned transfers and these vehicles are never used to transfer emergencies. Emergency patients will usually be taken to hospital in an ambulance, sometimes with police support. Violent patients who cannot be managed in an ambulance would travel in a police vehicle.

Yours faithfully

Robert McFarland

Chairman Quality Committee

London Ambulance Service