

# Raising fraud awareness in the NHS

In this article, **Ahmer Kunwar** describes how fraud is being tackled within the NHS and how NHS professionals can help

This year fraud awareness month is taking place from 9 November to 9 December and it has become an established annual event in the NHS calendar. Over the past three years, NHS counter-fraud specialists have organised highly successful events at health organisations throughout England and Wales, raising fraud awareness among NHS staff, professionals and the public. This year local counter-fraud specialists (LCFSs) will identify and target those areas within their health organisations where fraud awareness may be still low and take action to develop an anti-fraud culture. LCFSs who are responsible for carrying out all work to counter fraud and corruption in their health organisations will lead work for the campaign on a local level. They will conduct a range of activities to:

- Raise the level of fraud awareness among professionals within the NHS
- Provide information on how NHS professionals can report suspicions of fraud
- Illustrate the role that NHS professionals can play in preventing fraud

The LCFSs have planned seminars to deliver presentations to NHS staff and professionals in their local trusts. They will also be handing out leaflets to staff and patients, placing messages on local intranet sites and featuring articles in staff newsletters. In addition, a poster campaign will be developed to heighten the awareness. Those who would like to attend seminars or require any publicity materials should contact their LCFSs.

The NHS Counter Fraud Service (CFS) has found degrees of fraud in many areas of the NHS, with pharmaceutical fraud being no exception. Pharmaceutical fraud has been committed by patients, hospital prescribers, hospital dispensers, dispensing doctors, GPs, community pharmacists and appliance contractors. The case study (see Panel) gives an



A telephone line has been set up for reporting suspicions of fraud in the NHS

example of pharmaceutical fraud perpetrated against the NHS and subsequent action taken by the NHS CFS. The NHS CFS hopes that by taking tough action it will deter potential fraudsters from carrying out such offences.

With a clear understanding of the risks faced by the NHS and a wealth of experience in this area, the NHS CFS can recognise where a process is susceptible to fraud. Once it recognises that a weakness exists, it can take measures to prevent it from happening again. Most pharmacists are honest, but there is a small minority who try to defraud the NHS of its valuable resources. Fraud has been detected among a small minority of pharmacists in various forms. Some of these include making false endorsements on a prescription sent to the Prescription Pricing Division, claiming for drugs not dispensed, under-dispensing, abuse of the repeat prescribing system, retaining and not declaring paid prescription charges on low cost drugs, and illegal importation or exportation of prescription drugs. Fraud has also been detected among patients who try to pass stolen prescription forms, engage in counterfeiting and forgery of prescriptions and use multiple identities or registrations to obtain drugs.

By working together to reduce fraud and corruption to an absolute minimum and holding it there permanently, counter-fraud services can release these resources for better patient care. LCFSs and the NHS CFS can, more than ever before, protect vital NHS resources but to do so it is essential that people report any suspicions that they have.

It is difficult to produce a model to address all types of pharmaceutical fraud but the NHS CFS encourages all NHS staff and contractors to undertake regular reviews of pre-

scribing and dispensing trends, and to review procedures and contracts annually. Should any suspicions be identified during the reviews they should be reported to the LCFS.

The NHS CFS has already achieved a great deal by raising awareness about fraud and sharing best practice. Between 1999 and 2005:

- It has provided a total financial benefit of £675m to the NHS — a phenomenal 13:1 return on investment
- It has cut overall losses in the area of patient fraud by 54 per cent from £171m to £78m a year
- It has had a remarkable 96 per cent success rate for prosecution
- Over 1,400 fraud awareness presentations have been delivered to key NHS staff
- Over 980,000 NHS staff and professionals have been covered by counter-fraud charter agreements to work with the NHS CFS to counter fraud and corruption

Last year, fraud awareness month proved to be highly successful, reaching a total audience of 13 million people. This year, it is expected to have an even bigger impact — nationally and internationally — and will coincide with the United Nations worldwide anticorruption day and the European healthcare fraud and corruption awareness campaign (EHFCAC). The EHFCAC was developed by the NHS CFS to persuade NHS professionals that fraud exists, that it is serious and that it takes resources away from important services.

The purpose of the EHFCAC is to develop an anti-fraud and anti-corruption culture within health care systems among service providers, health care suppliers, health care payers, health care users and ultimately among all EU citizens.

The United Nations worldwide anticorruption day marks an international day to raise awareness worldwide and calls upon governments to take action against corruption. In 2004, 110 countries signed up to the United Nations convention against corruption.

## Pharmacist fined for fraud

At Coventry Crown Court in April a pharmacist was ordered to pay £14,200 or face prison. The pharmacist pleaded guilty to 21 counts of false accounting after admitting to falsifying records for the supply of drugs and was fined £200 per count. After discrepancies were noticed at the pharmacy, an investigation revealed that the pharmacist was claiming for items that had not been dispensed. He also claimed to have dispensed large amounts of medicines in small packs, whereas in fact they had been dispensed in large packs; this has an impact on the cost to the NHS.

The pharmacist was ordered to pay £10,000 in prosecution costs with the condition that if this and the fine were not paid within 28 days, he would be subject to three months in prison.

## Reporting NHS fraud

Those who suspect NHS fraud should report it to their LCFSs or to the NHS fraud and corruption reporting line (tel 0800 028 40 60). All calls will be addressed by trained staff and investigated. Telephone lines are open weekdays from 8am–6pm. Fraud may also be reported by sending an e-mail to [nhsfraud@cfsms.nhs.uk](mailto:nhsfraud@cfsms.nhs.uk).

To find out more about fraud awareness month 2006 visit the NHS CFS website at [www.cfsms.nhs.uk](http://www.cfsms.nhs.uk) or send an e-mail to [cad@cfsms.nhs.uk](mailto:cad@cfsms.nhs.uk).

**Ahmer Kunwar**, BA, CIPR, is internal and external communications manager at the NHS Counter Fraud and Security Management Service in London. (e-mail [Ahmer.Kunwar@cfsms.nhs.uk](mailto:Ahmer.Kunwar@cfsms.nhs.uk))