Health Minister for Northern Ireland Edwin Poots has informed Members of the Legislative Assembly of the results of an inquiry that has uncovered evidence that shortcomings may have led to serious deficiencies in the standards of care afforded to patients at Belfast Dental Hospital.

The inquiry was instigated in February 2011 by the then Health Minister and was led by Brian Fee QC, following a recall of 117 patients by the oral medicine service at the hospital. It has emerged that 22 of those patients were either diagnosed or referred far later than recommended and that they represented a ‘major concern’. It was found that difficulties in one department arose from excessive workloads and a lack of adequate administrative support and further problems uncovered included 1156 unfiled items, 93 missing charts, 161 ‘hospital concerns’ and problems with the appointment system. The inquiry made a total of 45 recommendations and the Belfast Trust maintains that it has learned ‘valuable lessons’ from the experience.

Both Poots and Chief Executive of the Belfast Trust Colm Donaghy have offered their apologies to the patients and have professed an understanding of the “serious deficiencies” in the oral medicine department. Donaghy maintained that the Trust has always acted in the best interests of its patients and stated: “The extent of the impact that delay in diagnosis or referral had on the outcome...is unknown at this stage... according to the report a Serious Adverse Incident Complaint should have been raised earlier and we accept that. We also accept that in terms of communicating and escalating the issue we should have done that at an earlier stage in terms of the former processes, to keep others informed in terms of the progress that was being made.”

“What I would have to say is that the people involved in this did not deliberately keep this issue secret or quiet, they were concerned about continuing to provide care for the patients involved and always acted in the interests of those patients.”

Poots declared the situation to represent an unacceptable failure on the part of the Trust and warned that such a situation “cannot be permitted to happen again”. The Chair of the Assembly Health Committee Michelle Gildernew also drew attention to the seriousness of the events and Conall McDevitt of the SDLP stated that he could not think of a more serious situation involving a single trust.

The results of the inquiry can be viewed at www.dhsspni.gov.uk/executive_summary_dental_inquiry.pdf

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Inquiry reveals ‘shortcomings’ at Belfast Dental Hospital

Lack of support and excessive workloads caused problems says report