

News Release

June 12th 2007

National patients' group says Government's health plans will undermine NHS

In reaction to the Government's response to the The Health Committee's Report on Patient and Public Involvement (PPI) in the NHS, a new national group representing statutory patients' organisations is today challenging Government plans to re-organise the way the NHS listens to the public and claims there is a danger that patients' interests and patient care will be put at risk.

The newly elected National Association of Patients' Forum's Steering Group (NASG), is concerned that the Government is scrapping the 'patient involvement' Forums after only three and a half years, without any realistic action to replace them. The NASG also asserts that short deadlines and lack of realistic action by the Department of Health will create disastrous gaps between Forums closing and new Local Involvement Networks (LINKs) starting work. The NASG fears the delay will leave patients and public without an effective, independent and powerful voice just as the NHS is facing massive service cuts across the country.

Malcolm Alexander, Chair of the NASG, said:

"The Government's response to the Health Committee's Report on PPI, confirms they lack insight and know how to develop effective monitoring of health and social care. Their plans for LINKs are vague, poorly thought out and open to domination by powerful voluntary sector providers with a range of conflicts of interest. The DH confirms it intends LINKs to have no significant statutory powers and grossly inadequate rights of entry to view health and social care delivery. The power to make 'recommendations and get a response' to be conferred on LINKs is virtually worthless in a system increasingly dominated by commercial providers. The DH skate over their failure to ensure an effective transition between Forums and LINKs. LINKs will need real powers to influence change. What is being offered by the DH is of little use to patients and the public struggling to develop effective local health services".

"We demand the Government changes its mind on re-organising patient representation. Unless we stop the Government now, legislation to abolish Patients' Forums and create LINKs will go through Parliament and gain Royal Assent in November 2007".

"Forums are being closed on 1st April 2008 by the Government, yet planning is still very basic, budgets haven't been worked out and the proposed system for holding local NHS hospital Trusts and PCTs to account is vague and weak."

"If it doesn't get this right, we predict that many dedicated volunteers who make up the current successful system of patient involvement will walk away. This would be a huge and damaging loss to local accountability in the health service, as they would take with them more than three years' knowledge and experience of their local health services. The Government claims it wishes to retain the expertise of Forum members, yet it is treating them with contempt."

News Release

"We demand that the Government consults directly with Forums and the NASG and involves the NASG in their planning for any changes to the public involvement system. We need assurances for Patients' Forums that transition to a new system will not result in the NHS becoming effectively unaccountable to patients and the public."

End

For further information please contact:

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Information for journalists:

- The Department of Health published its response to the The Health Committee's Report on Patient and Public Involvement in the NHS yesterday. You can view a copy by clicking here:
http://www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_075501
- The 18 member strong Steering group was elected in an independently-conducted national ballot of Patients' Forum members across England. There are approximately 4,500 volunteer members in 393 Patient's Forums. The Steering Group will provide a democratic representative voice for Forum members across the country.
- The National Association of Patients' Forums will be monitoring the Government's proposed changes to public accountability in the NHS and actively lobbying the Government and opposition to make sure the proposals adequately protect and defend patients' interests.
- The Government is proposing to replace the current system of Patient' Forums with Local Involvement Networks (LINKs). The Local Government and Public Involvement in Health Bill containing the proposals is currently going through Parliament. The second reading in the Lords will be on June 20th 2007.
- Patients' Forums are independent statutory watchdogs, made up of volunteers from the local community. Their role is to monitor the NHS and make sure the voice of patients and the public is listened to by NHS decision-makers.
- There is Patients' Forum for every NHS Trust, Primary Care Trust, and Foundation Trust in England.