

① FP
② Pending July (AK)

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

Press release

94\278

14th June 1994

PATIENTS' "WATCHDOGS" MUST RE-FOCUS THEIR VIGILANCE, SAYS BRIAN MAWHINNEY

Health Minister foresees new opportunities for community health councils

New opportunities lie ahead for community health councils, once a new, single, and simplified NHS complaints procedure is in place, Dr Brian Mawhinney, Minister for Health, said today.

The Minister was addressing a conference organised by the Association of Community Health Councils of England and Wales, to allow CHC representatives to discuss recent proposals to replace existing complaints procedures.

Dr Mawhinney said: "Your traditional role has been to be the patient's 'watchdog', and I know that you have been particularly busy during implementation of the health service reforms to ensure that local services are tailored to meet the needs of their populations.

"As you all know, the existing machinery for complaining about service in the NHS has been overhauled recently by an independent review committee, chaired by Professor Alan Wilson, Vice-Chancellor of Leeds University.

"The consultation period for comments on the report has not yet ended. But it is clear that there need to be changes. We cannot continue with such confusing procedures, which have simply been allowed to evolve in piecemeal fashion since 1948.

"CHCs have provided support to those patients who wish to complain about NHS services and, in many cases have complained on their behalf. But it is likely that one of the major effects of the new procedures will be to empower, and indeed encourage, patients to complain direct to the relevant NHS service. I intend that most patients should be able to achieve a satisfactory - and speedy - outcome to their complaints.

"There will be new opportunities for CHCs. You will be relieved of the onerous task of steering worried patients through a labyrinthine complaints system and will be able to re-direct your energies into plans for the future, rather than dwelling on mistakes of the past.

[MORE]

"You will have more capacity to contribute to the strategic planning of health services, on behalf of the population you serve. Complaining is only one mechanism for improving the service and holding it to account. CHCs now will have the opportunity to contribute to the way in which health services are planned locally - to talk to health service managers, to tell them of any perceived shortcomings in what is on offer, and really to represent the wider interests of the community.

"I made it clear last year that by April 1994, every health authority should be able to demonstrate that it was taking systematic action to seek - and act on - the views of CHCs, voluntary bodies, the wider public, and their elected representatives.

"Earlier this year I wrote to every health authority chairman to satisfy myself that these arrangements were being addressed. The findings are, on the whole, encouraging. Most health authorities are doing much careful and painstaking work to involve CHCs and the wider public in decisions about purchasing health services.

Dr Mawhinney said: "I am determined that CHCs will be enabled and encouraged to refocus their work successfully to begin working even more effectively with purchasers to ensure more patient sensitive services in the future."

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