

Sharon Grant
Chair Designate
Commission for Patient and Public Involvement
in Health
Department of Health
Richmond House
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Dear Sharon

Thank you for coming to meet Sally Brearley and myself last week. We were very encouraged to have someone at the helm of the emerging Commission with fresh ideas and are confident that there is much we can work on together to help ensure the new Commission is a success. You asked me to write with ACHCEW's ideas about the transition to the new system, which I am very happy to do, having consulted Honorary Officers of the Association. The views set out in this letter are also based on extensive consultation with CHCs and are consistent with the views of the Transition Advisory Board and the views of the vast majority of other stakeholders who have been consulted.

Firstly, I would like to stress that it is not the desire of CHCs or ACHCEW to 'hang around' any longer than is necessary. We would like to see the earliest possible development of the new system, now that the legislation has been agreed, and for CHCs and ACHCEW to be abolished as soon as the new system is in a position to work. CHCs have already been greatly destabilised by the ongoing uncertainty, and we are disappointed that the Department has still not come up with a definite and realistic timetable for transition.

During the debates, Ministers gave assurances that CHCs and ACHCEW would not be abolished until the new system was 'up and running'. Taken literally, that would mean all Patients' Forums as well as the Commission and Overview and Scrutiny Committees. However, it is clear that this would take a very long time, and we do not believe it would be in the public interest to wait until implementation has been fully completed before CHCs and ACHCEW are abolished. We have therefore arrived at a 'bottom line' which we believe would protect the public interest sufficiently to make it acceptable for CHCs and ACHCEW to be abolished. We believe that that bottom line is the full establishment of PCT Patients' Forums across England. We see PCT Patients' Forums as the most important part of the new system replacing CHCs. We would therefore like to see top priority given to ensuring PCT Patients' Forums are established as quickly as possible, and we understand that the 'change management groups' to be facilitated by Strategic Health Authorities should soon start groundwork which will make it easier for the Commission to do this.

Crucial to the early establishment of PCT Patients' Forums will be the ability to retain existing CHC staff and members to run them. The status of CHC staff and possible 'transfer' should be resolved soon. If CHC members are encouraged to put themselves forward for the first wave of PCT Patients' Forum members (on a level playing field with other applicants) it would be realistic for you to recruit the numbers you need relatively quickly, and it would ensure a degree of continuity and experience is made available to the PCT Patients' Forums from the start.

If the strategy suggested above is followed, it would be possible for groundwork to be commenced now (many CHCs are already doing it), and for CHCs to be abolished one day and PCT Patients' Forums to be formally established and operating the next day. This seems to us to be the best strategy, rather than going for a period of 'double running' between CHCs and PCT Patients' Forums. We believe this would be unsustainable because many of the people needed for PCT Patients' Forums will need to come from CHCs. It would also be very confusing for patients, the public, and the NHS to have two systems running at the same time and lose the impact of a launch date for the new system. For similar reasons, we do not think it practical or desirable to have new implementation take place at different times in different parts of the country.

In summary:

- ◆ We think that the 'bottom line' to allow abolition of CHCs should be the establishment of PCT Patients' Forums across England, ready to run, with staff, members and premises.
- ◆ The implementation of this should have a single national date. This should be set as soon as possible at a point when it is realistic that this will be achieved.
- ◆ Staff and members of CHCs should be given the opportunity to join PCT Patients' Forums. The appointment process should allow them to remain with their CHCs until the transition takes place to ensure continuity of CHCs' service and smooth transition to the new system.
- ◆ A date should be set for the establishment of remaining Patients' Forums – possibly by April 2004?
- ◆ Consideration should be given to recruitment of ACHCEW staff to help the Commission get established and develop.

I look forward to hearing your thoughts.

Best wishes.

Yours sincerely

PETER WALSH
Director