

Reactions: a selection of responses to the proposed abolition of Community Health Councils

Community Health Councils (CHCs) – the patients' watchdog

- CHCs were established in 1974 as patient advocates within the NHS. They have been at the forefront of ensuring that the patients' voice is heard and their complaints listened to. Most recently, they played a pivotal role in ensuring that Rodney Ledward was exposed, and that the victims of Harold Shipman were supported.
- There are 204 CHCs in England and Wales. Similar bodies exist in Scotland (Local Health Councils) & Northern Ireland (Health and Social Services Councils).
- Each year CHCs assist around 30,000 people with complaints.
- CHCs give free, independent and confidential support.

"First, access to independent, expert advice to complainants is essential both for public confidence and to ensure that poor practice is identified. It is important that patients feel supported in making sound complaints and that they receive full and impartial advice about the range of options including, where appropriate, complaints to the GMC and litigation.

"Secondly, there is a strong case for a national network of organisations to promote the public interest in health care...ACHCEW has been effective in raising important points of concerns about the standard of care provided by the NHS. Other national organisations may not have the same independence of central government or, therefore, contribute in the same way to the accountability of the NHS".

"I would like both an independent advice service and a national body representing the public interest to cover all health care and not to be restricted to NHS patients."

Sir Donald Irvine CBE – President, General Medical Council

The General Practitioners Committee (GPC) is concerned that the proposal to abolish Community Health Councils could well threaten patient advocacy. The functions of Community Health Councils must be preserved with the roles of advocacy, scrutiny and inspection being carried on by a body independent of the NHS.

**British Medical Association Public Affairs Division
October 2000**

"We are deeply concerned that the Government is prepared to take the radical step of abolishing CHCs without first having a period of public consultation. As solicitors we believe that the abolition of CHCs would be bad for the patients we represent and result in greater litigation and more cost to the taxpayer and patients alike.

"The Government has often said that it is keen to 'enhance patient empowerment' but abolishing the CHCs will reduce patients' rights and incur greater costs. If there is going to be a change to the vital role performed by CHCs and even a possibility that they may be abolished then, in the interests of patients, there must be proper consultation about this."

Carolyn Kirby, Deputy Vice President of the Law Society and Chair of the Mental Health and Disability Committee

The Assembly expresses its concern that these proposed new bodies may lack the independence which enables the CHC to speak up frankly, effectively and constructively for the patients' interests.

Part of a motion passed unanimously by the Greater London Assembly, 18 October 2000

- CHCs have over 5,000 volunteer members who contribute freely of their time to act as unpaid watchdogs for NHS patients.
- A recent report, 'Hidden Volunteers', conducted by Community Service Volunteers (CSV) estimated that CHC members contribute over £7.9million worth of free labour to the NHS.
- CHCs carry out surveys to find out what local people need from the NHS. They are also responsible for national surveys, such as the annual 'Casualty Watch'.
- CHCs make regular unannounced visits to hospitals to check quality of service.
- Most CHCs are members of the Association of Community Health Councils for England & Wales. ACHCEW provides expert legal advice, training and information.

This Association regrets the Government's intention to abolish the Community Health Councils (CHCs) and calls upon the Government to ensure that consumers of health services will enjoy access to independent advocacy and consumer representation.

Motion passed by the National Association of Citizens' Advice Bureau at annual conference 2000

Mind shares many of the concerns of the Association of Community Health Councils (ACHCEW) about the Government's plans for replacement of community health councils with a range of bodies. The proposals do not seem to meet many of the key requirements for patient empowerment. We are particularly concerned at the lack of independence of the replacement bodies including the patients advocacy and liaison service (PALS) and patients forums. Independence is particularly important in relation to the advocacy role.

MIND Policy and Parliamentary Unit (16th October 2000)

"There is no way that the alternative proposals can replace the work that the best CHCs have been doing, particularly in relation to patients' complaints. We are deeply concerned that the statutory rights that enable CHCs to act on behalf of patients and the public will be lost if the proposals are implemented. CHCs must not be abolished until the proposed new bodies have proved themselves to be independent of the NHS and effective representatives of patients and the public."

Arnold Simanowitz – Chief Executive AVMA (Action for Victims of Medical Accidents)

Help the Aged is deeply concerned about the proposals to abolish Community Health Councils. We believe such a drastic move is premature, without a clear picture of what will replace them.

We suggest that there is still a need for an independent body to co-ordinate and support patient and community involvement at local level, and that it would be appropriate to give CHCs new roles and responsibilities to that effect rather than lose the expertise and good will that already exists.

Help the Aged Parliamentary Briefing Jan, 2001

"Age Concern believes that the Government has missed an opportunity to bring in a strategic approach to advocacy across all services. There are proposals for new hospital-based 'patient advocacy liaison services' (PALS), and the abolition of community health councils (CHCs), which were and were perceived to be independent. CHCs have had a wider role than solely representing individuals, and their abolition is a considerable cause for concern."

Gordon Lishman - Director-General of Age Concern England

For further reactions visit us at: www.achcew.org.uk