

Association of Community Health Councils for England and Wales

Annual Report 1981/82

Introduction

Because of the shift in the date of the Annual Meeting, this report covers only the period September 1981-May 1982. In some ways, this has been the most testing time for the Association since its formation.

Last year's Annual Report made the point that new methods of collaboration between the Association and its members, and an effective division of labour would have to be worked out. It went on to say that the workload of the Association and its cost would have to come under scrutiny, as the anticipated reduction in the number of CHCs and the financial pressures that they would be under were of considerable significance. Events have amply borne out this prognosis.

What was not foreseen when the 1980/81 Annual Report was written was that the Government would withdraw its financial support for CHC News. This decision, and the consequent effect on the prospects for CHC News and for the working of the Association, has been the single most striking event of the year, its impact being more immediate and more difficult to contend with than of "Patients First" two years ago. Two years ago, it was possible to mount a counter argument, and to mobilise sufficient support for it to convince the Government of the necessity to retain CHCs. This year, in spite of comparable efforts and an equal measure of outside support (including the signatures of 100 Members of Parliament on a House of Commons motion) it has not been possible to secure a Government change of heart.

At the time of "Patients First", Mr Jenkin and Dr Vaughan were in personal contact with us; it was possible to debate the issues with them, and Mr Jenkin came to present his case to a Special General Meeting. By contrast during the past year we have had next to no contact with Mr Fowler and other ministers, who have not shown themselves willing to meet our representatives or discuss the implications of their decision across the table. This has made for a difficult and frustrating year, which at times has been worrying as well.

Aberystwyth, September 1981

The first intimation of the Government's intentions was given at the Annual General Meeting, when DHSS officials present asked for a meeting with the Chairman. The Annual Meeting had already agreed to debate an emergency motion on the future role and membership of CHCs, and when the message from the DHSS became known a section was added to the motion to cover the funding of CHC News. This amended motion was carried resoundingly, and directed to the Secretaries of State for Social Services and for Wales immediately after the meeting.

451 delegates representing 187 CHCs attended the AGM, which endorsed two resolutions to amend the Constitution and Standing Orders of the Association and sixteen policy resolutions covering

- Consultation between health authorities and CHCs
- Health Service Statistics
- Inequalities in access to health care and the Black Report
- Access for disabled people
- NHS charges

- The care of elderly, mentally ill, mentally handicapped and multiple handicapped people
- Seat belts
- The abolition of the Children's Committee
- Community hospitals
- The appointment of War Planning Officers

as well as the resolution on the future of CHCs and CHC News.

In support of these resolutions representations were made to the Government and the Regional Health Authorities, as well as to interested groups among members of Parliament, voluntary organisations and others whose assistance might be influential. By way of action in support of the resolution on NHS statistics, evidence was submitted to the Körner Committee. Efforts have continued throughout the year to secure a parliamentary debate on the Black Report. For the first time ever, there has been no meeting with ministers to discuss the resolutions of the AGM and the response of the Government.

A new feature of the AGM in 1981 was a series of workshops on different subjects of interest to CHCs. The workshops covered items as wide-ranging as the future of the National Health Service and the means of making CHC visits to NHS premises more effective. Primary care, the complaints machinery, mental handicap, the needs of ethnic minorities and the acquisition and use of information formed the subject matter for the remaining workshops. The workshops produced resolutions, which were not adopted as policy, but note of which has been taken in the work of the Association in the intervening year.

A welcome visitor to the Annual Meeting was Mrs Renee Short, MP, Chairman of the House of Commons Select Committee on Social Services, who addressed the meeting on the work of her Committee and invited CHC contributions to its deliberations.

Circular HC(81)15 and the new CHC Regulations

On the day before Christmas, the DHSS finally published the long awaited circular on the future role of CHCs. The initial reaction of the Association and of member CHCs was one of disappointment that the number of members per CHC was to be reduced, in spite of strong representations to the contrary.

Many of the provisions made in the Circular and consequent regulations met the wishes of CHCs as expressed during the consultative period. At the end, however, it remains the case that four of the recommendations made in the 1980/81 Annual Report were not taken up. In addition to the number of members per CHC being reduced, there has been no move to accord CHCs the right of consultation with Regional Health Authorities or of observer attendance at meetings of Family Practitioner Committees (although this is once again urged on FPCs by ministers) and the doctrine that CHCs are "essentially local bodies" remains intact without reference to their response to the impact of national policies on their district or the need to influence policymakers in the interests of their communities.

Circular HC(81)15 and the new CHC Regulations will have an important influence on the operation of CHCs in the immediate future and the relationships they maintain with health authorities and the public. Taken together with the imposition of the management cost cutback on CHCs and the transfer of responsibility for the funding of CHC News from the Government to the individual CHC, they will have a major impact on the ability of CHCs to carry out the functions envisaged for them. Inevitably, the relationship of the Association with its member CHCs needs to be looked at again, and at the time of writing, a consultation exercise has been got under way. It should be completed, and any positive recommendations should be implemented by the time the next Annual Report is produced.

Developments during the Year

Shortly after the AGM the Association, in partnership with North Birmingham CHC, organised a seminar on lead pollution in Birmingham. The seminar looked at lead from all sources, and brought together leading experts in the field, including representatives of the oil and motor industries. Although the seminar was small the quality of content was high and two resolutions were adopted, calling for the elimination of lead additives from petrol and steps to eliminate bodily ingestion of lead from other sources. Adoption of these resolutions led the Standing Committee to associate itself with the CLEAR campaign. This decision was challenged by a number of member Councils, but validated subsequently by a wide measure of support from member CHCs when canvassed on the subject.

The policy of airing specialist topics in seminars was continued with a weekend seminar on services for well women held at Manchester Business School late in November 1981. This seminar was run by the Manchester CHCs and attended by more than 100 people from all parts of England and Wales. It produced some forceful suggestions for the organisation of preventive services for women, which are expected to be the subject of lively debate among CHCs during the coming year.

Two new services were incorporated into the work of the Association during the year. Commencing in January 1982, Judith Cook was engaged as Press Agent, with the responsibility of promoting press publicity for the Association's work and that of its member CHCs. Judith Cook is the holder of two major journalistic awards including the Periodical Publishers' Association Award for the campaigning woman journalist of 1982. An information service for CHCs on new developments in the health services field from a legal point of view was started in May 1982. This service is provided by John Finch, Sub-Dean of Law at Leicester University and author of the 1981 publication "Health Services Law". The value of these services will become apparent during the coming year.

The Association was represented at the National Consumer Congress 1982 at Guildford, the principal resolution of which demanded an extension of patients' rights in the NHS and enlargement of the powers of CHCs. The National Consumer Council has published a booklet and leaflets on its "Patients Rights" project, and it is very likely that the Association will be handling the distribution of these after initial publication.

Evidence was given to a number of official enquiries, most importantly to the parliamentary committee examining the Mental Health (Amendment) Bill and the Office of Fair Trading enquiry on the operation of the Opticians Act 1958. Both these submissions were arranged at short notice, and credit and thanks are due to the representatives of member CHCs who helped in arranging the evidence presented in coherent form.

At the invitation of the DHSS, a working group was set up to respond to the report of the Naylor Committee on Patient Transport Services. The interim report of this group has been circulated to CHCs for comment prior to production of a final report later this year.

At the level of more immediate personal transport, we have continued to argue the case with the DHSS for improvements to the wheelchair service for disabled people. Following an exchange of correspondence with the minister, Mr Rossi, in August and September 1981 when a series of proposals were put to him as a result of information collected from member CHCs, a meeting with the wheelchair service administration was arranged, and took place in April 1982. Many issues were clarified, and a paper arising from this meeting will be circulated to CHCs in the near future.

Some progress was made at last on the subject of problem drinking. After a year waiting for a reply from ministers to a resolution backed by more than 100 CHCs, a partial answer was received from Mr Kenneth Clarke, the new Minister of Health, in April 1982. At the time of writing, Mr Clarke's letter is receiving consideration, and further representations are likely to be made during the summer of 1982.

It may also be interesting to list topics on which the Standing Committee took a view during the year. Positive response from the DHSS has been scanty, but the opinions of CHCs have been faithfully relayed and pressed with ministers and officials on

- CHC relationships to the London Post-Graduate Hospitals
- The Government's decision that consultants' contracts should be held by Regional Health Authorities
- The Dental Strategy Review Group report and the New Cross School for Dental Therapists
- The Prison Medical Service
- The DHSS Consultative Paper "Care In the Community"
- The IYDP (England) Committee call for a unified disability income
- The sale of health centres to practitioners working in them
- Obstruction by professional protection societies of health authority enquiries into medical accidents
- The effect of cuts in universities' funding on professional recruitment to the NHS
- Hospital and clinic patients' travelling expenses
- Sickle Cell Anaemia as a condition meriting prescription charge exemption
- The Government's decision to give FPCs the status of independent health authorities
- CHC representation on the proposed Maternity Services Advisory Committee and the Mental Health Act Commission
- The April 1982 increases in NHS charges
- NHS Nursing Homes and the regulation of private Nursing Homes and Hostels
- Disposable syringes for diabetic patients
- The 3% employment "quota" for disabled people.

These topics will continue to be argued with the DHSS and other bodies wherever there is hope of progress being made.

Representation on Outside Bodies

In response to requests from the DHSS, the names of Dr Catherine Waind (South West Cumbria CHC) and Mr E A Hebron (Wirral Southern CHC) were forwarded as nominees for membership of the Prescription Pricing Authority. The Secretary of State appointed Mr Hebron. The name of Mr John Churchill (Secretary, West Somerset CHC) was also forwarded to the DHSS as nominee for membership of the Rural Dispensing Committee, to be set up following the Clothier Report on the role of doctors and pharmacists in the dispensing of medicines in rural areas.

Medicines Commission

Feeling a mounting sense of frustration at its inability to engage in effective dialogue with the Medicines Commission and its associated Committees, the Association welcomed approaches from the National Consumer Council, the Consumers' Association and the National Federation of Consumer Groups, who had the same experience. On behalf of the four bodies, the National Consumer Council commissioned a report on the Medicines Commission machinery and the operation of the 1968 Medicines Act, viewed from the position of the consumer. When the report had been studied, it was jointly agreed to endeavour:

1. to secure additional lay representation on the Medicines Commission (there is at present one

- lay member and it is intended to campaign for a second lay member to be appointed);
2. to campaign for the inclusion of a lay member in the membership of the Committee on Safety of Medicines and the Committee on the Review of Medicines (in that order of priority);
 3. to offer such information and other support to the present lay member on the Medicines Commission as each body can provide, having ascertained what would be most useful to her;
 4. to meet the Chairman of the Medicines Commission and to impress on him the need to take account of the areas of concern of users as well as those of the professional and the industrial interests represented on the Commission and its associated committees.

It is recognised that these decisions are only a preliminary step towards creating a productive working relationship with the Medicines Commission and the other bodies set up under the Medicines Act, but it is hoped that they will in fact open the door to greater progress.

Publicity for CHCs

Some decisions have been reached regarding the publicity effort to be made on behalf of CHCs by the Association. In mid-1981 the options recommended included the production of posters and handbills featuring national celebrities; an application to the BBC for the production of an access TV film on CHCs and their work; the appointment of a press consultant for the Association, and the development of a series of Public Service Announcements.

In the meantime, CHCs in three commercial TV regions have produced their own Public Service Announcements, and work is currently in hand for a similar effort under the London Weekend Television Community Information Scheme in collaboration between the Association and CHCs in the LWT region. As reported above, Judith Cook was appointed Press Agent for the Association and took up her duties in January 1982.

Consultations with member CHCs showed that "celebrity" posters and handbills were of limited popularity and therefore not likely to lend themselves to bulk production. A more indicative poster, with a straightforward message is to be produced and offered to CHCs, and the Association will also provide camera ready copy for local CHC handbills, based on the message used on the poster.

The idea of circulating leaflets to households throughout the country through the medium of local milkmen is also being revived, and CHC response sought.

We continue to provide information to the national and professional media, and representatives of the Association have appeared both on BBC and commercial TV and radio programmes. Invitations to address annual meetings or conferences organised by professional and voluntary organisations have been accepted and have offered a useful opportunity of pressing home a message on behalf of CHCs before an influential audience. Typical examples have been the Kings Fund seminar on the Acheson Report "Primary Care in London"; the Association of Optical Practitioners' Annual Conference, and training courses for registrars in community medicine organised by the London School of Hygiene and the Thames and Anglian Postgraduate Medical Education Consortium.

Work in Progress

Pressure of other events has led to a number of projects not being completed during the year under review. Most importantly, the study on NHS provision in London has more or less hung fire, as the result of the illness of the Chairman and his subsequent resignation from his CHC. The

atrocious winter weather coupled with the British Rail industrial action which characterised early 1982 led to many projects falling behind schedule, as a result of which we have not so far met with the Association of Optical Practitioners, or made adequate progress on the planned post-International Year of Disabled People seminar on rehabilitation.

Two projects started in 1981 but not completed are the compilation of a register of visual and/or recorded publicity material held by member CHCs, and the production of an induction handbook for new CHC members. At the present it is impossible to make any promises regarding these, though separate steps will be taken to involve the Association more directly in the provision of training seminars for new members.

At the time of going to press the final reports from the Coventry seminar on Inequalities in Health and the Manchester seminar on Services for Well Women are still to be published, as is the final updated report of the Study on NHS Dentistry. The Standing Committee may have to review its position on the latter in the early part of the coming year.

Finance and Membership

Total expenditure during the year amounted to £142,925. The CHC News share of this stood at £76,843 while the Association spent £66,082, of which the cost of the residential AGM at Aberystwyth accounted for £13,841. CHC News income comprised £2,350 receipts by way of subscription sales, the balance being obtained by DHSS grant. The income of the Association was split between £52,400 subscriptions, £2,587 interest on deposit and £18,851 in payment for the AGM, seminars and sundry services. The accounts have been approved by the DHSS auditors, and are available for examination on request.

In spite of the prevailing uncertainty, 173 CHCs have renewed membership of the Association by 31 May 1982 and we have been pleased to welcome back three of the Councils which withdrew from membership in 1980/81. Regrettably we have lost one long-standing member which has decided not to join for the present year.

CHC News and Information Service

Much of this report is overshadowed by the Government's decision to withdraw funding from CHC News and the consequent action necessitated. It is sufficient at this point to repeat that efforts to retain DHSS support were not wholly successful, but that ministers did agree to provide transitional finance up to a maximum of £30,000. Production and distribution of CHC News has gone on as normal during this period, and proposals have been put to CHCs to enable them to continue to obtain CHC News throughout the current financial year.

The question mark over CHC News has, however, had its effects internally, including a number of staff changes. Janet Hadley and Jenny Keating both left during the year to take up journalistic appointments with the National Council for Voluntary Organisations and Task Force respectively. Gill Kent was appointed to the editorial team in November 1981, and has fitted excellently into the structure.

Most notably, however, Dave Bradney has resigned as Editor for personal reasons and will be leaving CHC News very shortly. Gill Kent will be editing the magazine for the remainder of the present financial year, and the Editorial Board is making arrangements to ensure that she is adequately assisted.

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Personal

The Annual Meeting at Aberystwyth marked the end of Rod Griffiths' period of office as Chairman. No CHC member or employee can fail to be aware of the work done by Rod Griffiths initially as Vice-Chairman and later as Chairman of the Association. Due tribute was paid to him by delegates to the AGM. Subsequently, Rod Griffiths has accepted a locum appointment as Medical Officer to Central Birmingham Health Authority and has therefore resigned from his CHC and the Standing Committee. This report serves to record the Standing Committee's gratitude to him for his work, and to wish him well in his new area of activity.

Eric Thomas, Treasurer of the Association, was also obliged to resign during the year by virtue of his appointment to Dewsbury Health Authority. All those who met him must have enjoyed his authoritative and unconventional presentation of financial business, and again we express our appreciation and wish him well.

It has been a great pleasure and source of strength to the Association that Rod Griffiths was succeeded by Mr Merlin (D.M.) Thomas whose experience of the NHS, of CHCs and of the Association since its inception has been invaluable.

Sadly, this report also records the death of John Mather, former Secretary of Barnet/Finchley CHC and part-time general help and support to the Secretariat of the Association over the last four years. John became ill in October 1981, and died at the end of January 1982. His enthusiasm and encouragement is greatly missed.

Chairman's Appreciation

This report is about 10 months of activity beginning with the sudden announcement about the funding of CHC News, and followed soon after by the circular on the role and membership of CHCs. We are still feeling the effect of these developments which might be with us well into next year. Both required much time and effort from Mike Gerrard and Chye Choo in addition to the attention they have had to pay to the many demands made of them in the normal way.

For that I would like to thank them on behalf of ACHCEW, and in my final year of eight years' association with ACHCEW, to wish it well in the years ahead.