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Answering and Advisory Services on Health

May 1987

(c) Messages should be consistent in tone with the serious nature of the information provided. Innuendo or salacious

comment should be avoided."

Copies of the "Association of Telephone Information and Entertainment Providers Code of Practice for Premium Services" can be obtained from:

British Telecom, Network Information Services, 2-12 Gresham St.
London EC2V 7AJ.

Complaints about violations of the Code should be sent to the Chairman of the Code of Practice Committee at the same address.

ATIEP are based at: 48 Grafton Way, London W1A

HEALTHLINE

Healthline was set up in 1984 under the auspices of the College of Health to provide tape-recorded information on medical problems. In 1986 the College of Health was taken under the wing of the Consumer's Association. For various reasons, Healthline did not move with them and is now registered as an independent charity called the Health Information Trust. Its President is Lord Young of Dartington. They receive DHSS funding, but only for their AIDSLINE service. The rest of their money comes from the sale of their services to Health Authorities.

The AIDSLINE is operated through an automatic exchange. For those wishing to hear any other tapes (about 250 in all), there are personal operators all of whom have been on counselling courses and will offer advice about which tape is appropriate before connecting you to it. Tony Smith of the British Medical Journal works for them as a consultant on the content of these tapes, which are all prepared by registered medical practitioners and dentists.

For the last year or so Healthline have been trying to persuade District Health Authorities to set up their own telephone answering services using Healthline's tapes and the same name "Healthline". The virtue of local tapes is that they can give local addresses for contact. So far four DHAs have purchased tapes from Healthline. Each of them calls their service "Healthline". They are Croydon, Exeter, Basingstoke and Hull. Basingstoke and Exeter also run health shops in conjunction with the telephone answering service. It is expected that very soon more DHAs will join the scheme, which is Healthline's main source of finance apart from the DHSS.

Healthline are looking at various ways of developing their information networks. At the moment the Information Officer, Janet Northover, is compiling a directory of the many local answering services which deal exclusively with AIDS. Quite a few of these are running into funding difficulties.

As a registered charity, Healthline is a non-profit making body and callers pay only the cost of their telephone call at the ordinary rate.

Health Information Trust, 18 Victoria Park Square, London E2

Tel: 01 980 6263

HEALTHLINE directory: 01 980 4848

MEDICAL ADVISORY SERVICE

The Medical Advisory Service is a registered charity "offering information and advice to members of the public on medical and health care matters". It is not a recorded telephone answering service. Nor do they offer diagnoses. They act as guides through the NHS, and if asked, will offer advice on the availability and cost of private treatment. They also refer people to self-help organisations and other charities. If someone feels that they are having problems communicating with their GP, MAS will contact the GP on his or her behalf. Much of this sounds remarkably like the work of the CHC as an information service.

Over the 1986 Christmas period MAS worked in collaboration with Capital Radio (HELPLINE). HELPLINE continues to refer callers with medical queries to MAS. The service is free, except of course, for the ordinary cost of a phone call. Their Advisory Service Coordinator, Karen Kelly, is an SRN. She would be happy to send brochures to any CHCs who want them.

MAS were set up with private funding and are currently looking for more permanent forms of sponsorship.

Medical Advisory Service, 10 Barley Mow Passage, London W4 4PH

Tel: 01 994 9874

HEALTHCALL

Healthcall is a commercial venture run by AIR CALL Ltd. As the name suggests, AIR CALL offer other kinds of telephone and answering services. These include deputising services for solicitors and GPs, the HOMELINK service and astrological information. Healthcall was set up in 1986 and, unlike Healthline, offers a 24 hour service. All calls go through an automatic exchange directly to the tape. Recently they claimed to be receiving 100,000 calls a week. You may have noticed their large advertisements in the national daily press. As with Healthline, Healthcall's tapes are prepared by registered medical

practitioners and dentists. Their work has been officially endorsed by the Royal College of General Practitioners, who provide an editorial team of six doctors to review and update the tapes.

Healthcall charges for their services at the British Telecom M rate. Part of this money goes to British Telecom, part to Healthcall. If you dial a tape during off-peak hours, you will be paying almost ten times as much as the ordinary cost of a call. M rate is equivalent to phoning the Republic of Ireland or using a car telephone.

When Healthcall first appeared, their advertising neglected to mention this fact. Unsuspecting users could imagine that they would pay only the cost of an ordinary phone call. This was brought to the attention of OFTEL, who required all future advertising to carry information on the charge rates for calls. You will see it in the small print.

HEALTHCALL directory: 0898 600 600

COMMENTS FROM ACHCEW

Healthcall's original marketing techniques have highlighted the need for the proper regulation and monitoring of these increasingly popular services. The duties and powers conferred on Oftel and the Code of Practice Committee go a long way towards doing this. For the rest, it depends on members of the public bringing cases to their attention.

The wider dissemination of accurate practical information presented in a clear and balanced way must be a good thing. These benefits are tarnished when people are given inadequate information about the cost of the service they are buying and profits are made as a result. Omissions of this sort should be reported to the Code of Practice Committee. ACHCEW would also be keen to hear from any CHC that has dealt with a complaint about one of these services.

K.Howse 7.5.87