

Earl Howe
House of Lords
London
SW1

6/2/03

Dear Freddie,

Thank you so much for leading an excellent debate in the Lords on February 3rd. There is clearly much to be done to ensure that the new system works effectively for patients and the public.

We have been in discussions with London Health Link and the key issues, which we feel need to be dealt in the debate follow below. I am sure that you will have other issues, which you will wish to raise, and we would be happy to support you with additional information. Full briefings will follow.

- 1) The 'One Stop Shop' approach. We believe it is essential that there is a 'one stop shop' in every PCT area to enable members of the public and patients to get effective and easy access to the new system i.e. Patients' Forums, ICAS, OSC etc.
- 2) Independent Complaints Advisory Service. We need to make sure that the ICAS system is up and running as soon as Patients' Forums are established. This should be from September 1st 2003, but the Government has now admitted that this won't be the case. Nevertheless, we believe that the demand that there should be no gaps in the system should be sustained. Clearly the Government are currently presenting the PALS service as a substitute for ICAS and this is a very great concern in terms of both independence and service quality. The current complaints system must transform into an effective ICAS system.
- 3) Independence. The relationship between the Commission and the Secretary of State continues to be a matter of great concern to CHCs. In particular the right of the Secretary of State to vary the work programme of the commission is in our view a serious challenge to the independence of the Commission and by extension to Patients' Forums and ICAS.
- 4) Resources. The budget for the Commission is yet to be announced. The decision to close CHCs on September 1st 2003, rather than in line with the Hansard commitment, is we believe due to the shortage of funding. We know there have been very difficult negotiations between the Commission and the DoH and these discussion have clearly not yielded sufficient money to run the new system to the

specification we had expected from Ministerial answers. Sufficient resources are needed to establish Patients' Forums and ICAS from September 1st if we are to avoid the winter gap of six months.

- 5) Networks. The Commission plan to set up formal partnerships with local networks to support Patient' Forums. These partnerships are expected to consist of consortia of voluntary sector bodies, or other local groups. The Commission expects that each partner will support a number of Patients' Forums by drawing on the local networks and knowledge already present within the community. We believe this proposal is built on patchiness and the inevitable unevenness of the voluntary sector across the country make the implementation of this plan untenable in many if not most areas.
- 6) Transfer of Skills and Knowledge of Staff and Members. We believe it is essential that the unique skills and knowledge of CHC staff and members are harnessed to develop the new system. There is no other group of staff with expertise, skills and knowledge comparable to CHC staff and members. It is essential that they are able to transfer into the new system to get it running smoothly and effectively for the benefit of patients and the public.

There are many Hansard commitments and written guarantees, which we believe, have not been met by the Government and we will let you have full details of these in due course.

I look forward to seeing you on Monday.

Yours Sincerely

Malcolm Alexander
Director