

Commission on Representing the Public Interest in the Health Service

Chair: Will Hutton, Editor-in-Chief, The Observer

Secretary: Angeline Burke

18 March 1999

Dear Colleague

I am writing as chair of the recently established independent Commission on Representing Accountability in the Health Service to invite you to make a written submission to us.

Established by the Association of Community Health Councils this March, you will see from the attached note that the terms of reference set us an ambitious brief, and that the membership of the Commission is fully independent. If we succeed I believe we will begin an important debate with potentially radical policy conclusions.

There has been a growing groundswell of concern about the responsiveness and accountability of the NHS to public concerns, ranging from worries about clinical accountability over, for example, breast cancer screenings and operations on babies to the criteria governing the construction of PFI hospitals.

There has been a parallel concern within the NHS and government that trust in the health service and health professionals, although high, is on a falling trend and that government guidance across the gamut of health issues has declining credibility and legitimacy. The situation is close to a crisis.

Our aim is to examine the issue of accountability in the round, exploring whether and how its improvement would increase the NHS's capacity to develop with a clearer idea of the public interest and thus improve the reciprocal relationship between patients, the wider public and the NHS.

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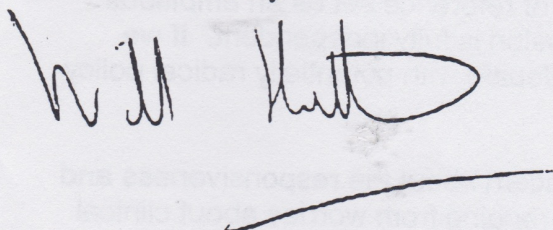
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We have grouped our initial areas of inquiry under five headings: public interest and representation; accountability; consultation; how proposed changes to the NHS may require different and new systems of accountability; and the role of Community Health Councils. Please comment on any or all of these themes as you feel equipped.

The indications are that the response to the Commission will be good, so we are asking evidence to be as short and tightly edited as possible; it is also important that we draw directly on peoples' and institutions' direct experiences to give us a better feel of the issues and opinion, so please free to move beyond analysis and statistics and paint as vivid a picture as you can. It is only if we properly reflect public anxieties and professional concerns alike that we will be able to offer robust ideas for reform.

We will be establishing a web site as a way of stimulating feedback, and will be trying to encourage as much debate, comment and analysis as possible. After an initial interim discussion paper, published in July, we aim to complete our report within the year. As a result we would like written submissions by the end of May, as it is likely that we will want to explore in more detail the comments you make during the summer and early Autumn. I hope very much you feel able to respond; the success of a Commission of this type depends on the quality of your responses. I dare to thank you in advance for your submission!

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Will Hutton', with a long horizontal line extending from the end of the signature.

Will Hutton