

All Party Parliamentary Group on Patient Safety

The New “Super Regulator” – A Risk to Patient Safety? – 18 March 2008

Overview:

The focus of this meeting of the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Patient Safety was to discuss the Government plans to streamline the three bodies that monitor hospital, care homes and mental health services into a single regulator known as the Care Quality Commission (CQC) by April 2009.

Speakers:

- Nicholas Timmins, Public Policy Editor, The Financial Times
- Vanessa Bourne, Head of Special Projects, The Patients Association
- Jo Webber, Deputy Policy Director, NHS Confederation

Welcome:

Dr Howard Stoate MP, Chair of the group, welcomed all attendees to the meeting and opened with a brief introduction of the speakers and the issues at hand. Dr Stoate recognised the relevance of the discussion and cited that the bill is currently going through the House of Lords.

Nicholas Timmins:

Nicholas Timmins, Public Policy Editor for The Financial Times started by stating that he believes a regulatory reform uniting both public and private sectors was long overdue, and a seamless, combined service would be attractive to the public. However, he warned that the bill as it now stands is badly timed and suggested the House of Lords ‘chop up’ the bill.

Mr Timmins highlighted that the current Social Commission and Health Commissions are relatively new bodies and are beginning to gain experience and make a difference. Timmins expressed concern that the set up of a new regulatory body would undo the great progress made by those at present. Timmins stated that the original reason behind building the ‘Health Quality Commission’ was to save money. However, he estimated that the costs would increase while the savings would be smaller than expected, and claimed that with a long transition period causing disruption for patients and health and social care providers, the new regulator would neither improve service nor save money.

Vanessa Bourne:

Vanessa Bourne, Head of Special Projects at The Patients Association reminded the group that patients are the reason for the existence of the NHS, and are arguably also shareholders in the NHS. Ms Bourne said that in her experience, the overwhelming majority of patients are “ignorant” of the current regulatory structure, while the unique position of the NHS means that unlike other consumers, patients cannot go elsewhere for their treatment.

Ms Bourne stated that for it to be worthwhile to streamline the regulators, it should be more effective, reduce waste and risk of legal action against the NHS, while also eliminating the postcode lottery in existent at the moment (although this is not an issue tackled by the current proposals.)

Ms Bourne concluded by questioning whether the super regulator would make a difference to the way public health is perceived, and whether it would prevent the current culture of cover-ups of mistakes.

Jo Webber:

Jo Webber, Deputy Policy Director of the NHS Confederation began by discussing where patient safety sits within the reform of the regulatory service. She explained that the current regulatory system is overburdened with bureaucracy, and the current regulators do need to be aligned and increase coherency. However, Ms Webber also pointed out that patient safety needs to remain the focus of the NHS during this transition.

Ms Webber supported a new regulator which would look at issues such as patient safety, and include pro-active scrutiny. She explained that a super-regulator would make it easier for the NHS to deal with conditions such as long-term illnesses, where treatment must overlap different sectors.

Ms Webber also detailed that general practitioners had not been included in many discussions and stated that there needs to be further consideration around this area. However, she said that the new super regulator would have to be in existence for a long period of time, unlike its predecessors, in order to ensure patient safety.

Conclusion:

Dr. Stoaite thanked each speaker and invited attendees to ask any questions they might have. The panel answered on a variety of subjects, including culture clash within different sectors of the NHS, what the definition of unacceptable healthcare might be, and how to achieve balance in the new system. A detailed discussion was held on the system dealing with patient complaints and how this should be dealt with. **On the subject of GPs**, Mr Timmins believed that it was inevitable that the GP sector would soon find themselves covered by a vigorous regulatory system, stating it is important that this be as coherent as possible. Howard closed the discussion and suggested another APPG on the topic of the "Super Regulator" take place later in the year, assuming the bill passes in the House of Lords.