New patients' forums are no substitute for community health councils, MPs say

Anne Gulland *London*

A committee of MPs has called for community health councils to be given a seven month reprieve because of the confusion surrounding the new system of involving patients in the NHS.

A report by the Commons health select committee called for the community health councils' period of operation to be extended from December 2003 until July 2004 after it cast doubt on how many of the new patient involvement bodies were in place.

MPs said that none of the new bodies had the "overview, independence or direct means for patients to input into local services... And they cannot, in our view, be described as an adequate replacement for CHCs

[community health councils], even as an interim measure."

In May the committee questioned the assertion by the then health minister David Lammy that 96% of NHS trusts had established Patient Advocacy and Liaison Services (PALS), bodies which will provide "on the spot" help and advice. He said in a parliamentary answer last October that this information was not collected centrally.

The report stated: "We find it astonishing that the minister was unable to provide information on the extent to which government policy was being implemented."

The committee was critical of Mr Lammy, now a minister at

the new Department for Constitutional Affairs, but it acknowledged that he took the brief only in May 2002.

MPs said: "We are dismayed that at our evidence session Mr Lammy apparently failed to grasp the subtle but extremely important distinctions between the organisations which his government is currently setting up."

MPs were also exasperated that in the three years since the announcement of the new arrangements in the NHS Plan in July 2000 four ministers have been in charge of this "important area."

The committee also criticised the introduction of the Patient and Public Involvement Forums, which will monitor Patient Advocacy and Liaison Services and the Independent Complaints and Advocacy Services. MPs cast doubt on Mr Lammy's assurances that all forums would be in place by December.

MPs warned that because the appointment process to the

forums had been delegated to local voluntary organisations, single issue groups would dominate and only a small group of users would have an input.

David Hinchliffe, chairman of the select committee, added that the committee wanted to put on record its "amazement" that the government's plans for overhauling patients' involvement via foundation hospitals had not come to light sooner.

He said: "We are left with the impression that some policy within the Department of Health is formulated in total isolation from other policy, leading to the ridiculous situation whereby the NHS and its patients are now faced with the introduction of two parallel but entirely different systems of patient and public involvement within the NHS within one year." □

Patient and Public Involvement in the NHS can be accessed at www.parliament.uk/parliamentary_committees/health_committee

Food industry obfuscates healthy eating message

Charles Marwick *Washington, DC*

Food giants are going to enormous lengths to obfuscate US government health messages on healthy eating, according to a recent symposium held in Washington, DC, by a consumer advocacy group, the Center for Science in the Public Interest, on how corporations seek to influence science and science policy.

"Food is big business, \$1.3 trillion [£0.8 trillion; €1.2 trillion] in revenue yearly," said Dr Marion Nestle from the department of food and nutrition studies, New York University. "It supplies an average of 3900 kilocalories [16.3MJ] daily [the recommended daily intake is 2200-2500 kilocalories a day], and the food industry will do everything to make sure that no regulatory agency and no nutritionist ever suggests eating less."

Doing something about obesity means getting people to eat less, said Dr Nestle. "But to get people to eat less, one has to explain what that means and what they should eat less of," she said.

She argued that, as a result of pressure from food companies,

the US dietary recommendations use euphemisms that cloud this message.

She said that they talk about "healthy weight"; they say "be more active" and "choose." They say "moderate" when what they really mean is "eat less"—but they don't say so, she said, adding, "No government statement tells people to eat less."

Dr Nestle cited examples. One was a recommendation to decrease meat consumption. The meat producers objected so the statement was replaced with the phrase, "choose meats, poultry and fish which will reduce saturated fat intake." Another was a call to reduce sugar intake. Under pressure from the sugar industry it was changed to "choose beverages

and foods that limit your intake of sugar." Then it was further modified to "choose beverages and foods to moderate your intake of sugar."

"The difference between "limit" and "moderate" may not seem very important, but it's an indica-

tion of the extremes to which lobbyists will go to make sure nobody eats less," said Dr Nestle.

The symposium was part of a project that the Center for Science in the Public Interest is sponsoring—"Clean Science in Regulation." The project is exploring the proper relation between an independent scientific community and the business community.

"Science can benefit from the business community's dollars and ideas. On the other hand, excessive business influence can undermine scientific rigour and credibility," said Michael Jacobson, the centre's executive director.

The ultimate goal of the symposium was to seek ways to ensure that regulatory agencies get reliable scientific information and advice when implementing health, safety, and environmental laws. It wants to prevent regulated industries from attacking and discrediting valid scientific information and to examine issues, such as bias in advisory committee membership, as well as conflicts of interest in the sponsorship of scientific studies used in product regulation. □