Nigel Crisp steps down from NHS amid financial pressures

Rebecca Coombes *London*

The chief executive of the NHS and permanent secretary at the Department of Health, Nigel Crisp, is to step down at the end of this month after acknowledging accountability for the health service's financial problems.

Sir Nigel said his decision to enter early retirement at the age of 54 was taken with "sadness."

Despite overseeing huge increases in spending and waiting list reductions he admitted in a frank statement that "not everything had gone well."

"I am particularly saddened by the difficulties we have had over the last few months and the financial problems we are grappling with. As chief executive I wish to acknowledge my accountability for problems, just as I may take some credit for achievements," he said.

Although lasting more than five years in one of the most challenging jobs in Whitehall, during which he oversaw the implementation of the first half

of the 10 year NHS plan, Sir Nigel has come under huge pressure as the health service's overspend heads towards a record £620m (€904m; \$1080m) for 2005-6.

The secretary of state for health, Patricia Hewitt, supported Sir Nigel's decision to go, saying that he had been responsible for huge improvements in the care of patients. She said, "As a result of Sir Nigel's efforts, the department has become a role model for the successful delivery of public services. On a personal level I regret his decision announced today, but I respect his integrity and wish him well for the future."

Gill Morgan, chief executive of the NHS Confederation, the body that represents NHS organisations, said that Sir Nigel had steered the NHS through "five turbulent years."

"He led the service through a time of record change which saw unprecedented levels of invest-

Nigel Crisp steps down from his job with "sadness"

ment, waiting lists slashed, and the introduction of an enormous reform programme."

Sir Nigel has been criticised for driving through further re-organisation of strategic health authorities and primary care trusts at a time when managers were struggling with the govern-

ments' ambitious targets on waiting times.

The chief executive of the Institute of Healthcare Management, Jeremy Millar, said, "History will judge whether the pace of change has been accelerated beyond the capacity of the system to cope. Many institute members have been forced to make cuts in an effort to balance the books. Many have had to leave the service themselves."

Sir Nigel was appointed to his current post in November 2000, becoming the first civil servant to combine the previously separate roles of head of the Department of Health and head of the NHS.

Interim arrangements to replace Sir Nigel will see the roles once again separated.

Ian Carruthers will become acting chief executive of the NHS (in charge of operational issues), and Hugh Taylor will become acting permanent secretary of the Department of Health.

CMAJ owner fails to guarantee editorial independence

David Spurgeon *Quebec*

The editorial autonomy of the *CMAJ*, the journal of the Canadian Medical Association (CMA), "is to an important degree illusory," says a highly critical commentary published last week. The commentary was produced by an ad hoc committee of the journal's editorial board following the firing of the journal's editor and deputy editor (*BMJ* 2006;332:503, 4 Mar). Soon after the commentary was published the acting editor resigned after the association refused to accept a plan he drafted that was aimed at ensuring editorial independence.

In an early release published online on 28 February (www.cmaj.ca), the committee said that the association and its publishing company, CMA Holdings (CMAH), "must make a choice about what kind of publication it wants *CMAJ* to be." It said that the choice is between a publication that accepts as inviolable editors' responsible exercise of editorial independence and one that makes publicly clear that its editors' conduct must "be consonant with the political, ideological, and strategic objectives of the CMA."

The committee said, "Any

attempt by the CMA to impose its influence on the editors would be catastrophic for the *CMAJ*'s reputation as well as damaging to the reputation of the CMA... *CMAJ* cannot be deemed to be a CMA newsletter, a cat's paw that is under the editorial direction of its custodians, the CMA/CMAH... In fact, the 'highest interest' of the CMA and of *CMAJ* can and should coincide."

John Hoey, the editor in chief of *CMAJ* who was dismissed with his deputy, Anne Marie Todkill, on 20 February by Graham Morris, publisher of the journal and president of CMA Media, a subsidiary of CMA Holdings (*BMJ* 2006;332:503), had asked the committee to review a series of events that he said had compromised the journal's independence. These

involved interference by the CMA and CMAH over a number of news stories.

The committee noted that the *CMAJ* is ranked fifth in impact factor (a rating of journals' influence) among general medical journals. To sustain its standing immediate corrective action is needed, the committee said. It recommended that improvements be made to the journal's oversight committee, which it said had become "an instrument through which CMA/CMAH can complain about journal content considered politically inconvenient."

The committee also expressed concern about the structure and operation of the journal's oversight committee.

The review and related articles can all be seen at www.cmaj.ca.