Strokes should be taken as seriously as heart attacks, MPs say

Adrian O'Dowd *London*

All strokes should be treated as a medical emergency and taken as seriously as a heart attack, concludes a parliamentary report that says hundreds of stroke patients die needlessly every year.

MPs on the House of Commons Committee of Public Accounts have stressed how important it is that stroke be treated in the same way as heart disease and cancer for lives to be saved and the risk of disability reduced.

The committee, publishing its report into stroke care in England last week, said stroke was one of the top three causes of death in England and the leading cause of disability among adults.

In England 110 000 strokes occur each year, a quarter of which are in people aged under

65 years. Some 300 000 people have moderate to severe disabilities as a result of stroke, says the report.

Despite this, stroke has not yet been given a high enough priority by the Department of Health, the report says, even though many strokes are preventable—and fast and effective acute treatment can significantly reduce the risk of death and disability.

The Conservative MP Edward Leigh, the chairman of the committee, said, "The message to be driven home among healthcare professionals ... is that stroke is a medical emergency requiring a 999 response and then rapid access to scanning to determine the most appropriate treatment. All stroke patients should also be treated on a specialist stroke unit.

"Each year hundreds of stroke patients needlessly die or suffer more serious disablement than they should because the NHS has failed to give stroke services the priority they warrant."

The committee's report says that the cost of stroke, in economic and human terms, can be reduced by reorganising services and using existing capacity better.

It recommends that various steps be taken, such as that the Department of Health should work with the Healthcare Commission (the NHS standards watchdog) and the Royal College of Physicians to develop benchmarks for stroke care; that the NHS should increase the proportion of stroke patients who spend most of their time in hospital in a stroke unit by 25%, thus prevent-

ing around 550 deaths each year; and that workforce planning should be changed so there are as many stroke consultants as heart disease consultants per patient.

The report acknowledges that the health department has taken some steps, such as establishing the Vascular Programme Board, which is now developing a stroke strategy, but it says more has to be done.

Joe Korner, director of communications and public affairs for the Stroke Association, said: "For far too long stroke has been a low priority for the NHS, resulting in needless deaths and disability for many thousands of people." □

Reducing Brain Damage: Faster Access to Better Stroke Care is available at www.parliament.uk.

GMC and attorney general challenge immunity for witnesses

Clare Dyer *legal correspondent, BMJ*

The attorney general, Peter Goldsmith, went to the Court of Appeal in London this week to try to overturn a High Court ruling that gave expert witnesses in court cases virtual immunity from disciplinary action by regulators over flawed evidence.

Lord Goldsmith, the UK government's senior law officer, intervened in an appeal by the General Medical Council against a ruling last February by a High Court judge, Mr Justice Collins, that cleared Roy Meadow of serious professional misconduct.

The retired paediatrician gave misleading evidence about the likelihood of two cot deaths in one family at the trial of Sally Clark for murdering her two babies in 1999. Mrs Clark's convictions were quashed at a second appeal in 2003.

After a complaint by her father, the GMC found Professor Meadow guilty of serious misconduct last July and ordered him to be struck off the medical register.

Mr Justice Collins ruled not only that Professor Meadow was not guilty of serious professional misconduct but that he should never have been brought before the GMC. The judge held that the rule that gives witnesses immunity from lawsuits over evidence given in court also extends to disciplinary action by regulators.

Lord Goldsmith took no issue with the judge's findings on Professor Meadow but argued that Mr Justice Collins's ruling that witnesses could not be brought before regulators unless a judge complained of their conduct was "an illegitimate development for the common law."

Lawyers for Professor Roy Meadow (above) argued that immunity should be absolute

Roger Henderson QC, for the GMC, told the three appeal court judges that immunity would make it harder to keep rogue experts out of the courts. "Dangerous expert witnesses and practitioners ... should be prevented from continuing to endanger the court process," he said.

Professor Meadow's lawyers argue that the immunity should be absolute, except where the testimony amounts to perjury, perverting the course of justice, or contempt of court, and that not even a judge should have power to refer an expert witness for disciplinary action.

Lord Justice Thorpe, one of the three appeal judges, noted during the hearing that the aftermath of the Clark case and that of Angela Cannings, whose convictions for murdering two babies were also quashed, was "having a dire effect on the willingness of practitioners to give evidence in the family courts."

Judgment was reserved after the three day hearing.