Health secretary pledges to continue NHS changes

Susan Mayor *London*

The traditional model of the NHS has to change if it is to continue to provide the best care for patients at the same time as maintaining its fundamental value of providing free care to all, the UK health secretary argued in a speech this week designed to quell alarm about threats of hospital closures.

The secretary of state for health in England, Patricia Hewitt, said that the traditional model of district general hospitals, which provide a range of care under one roof, was outdated. She argued that the next stage of development of the NHS was to put more power in the hands of patients and the local NHS.

National standards will be combined with local initiatives, with a range of service providers and money following patients, she told delegates at the Institute

for Public Policy Research, an independent think tank. "Primary care trusts, GPs, and their colleagues in primary practice will be central to the new NHS."

Ms Hewitt acknowledged that these were difficult times for people working in the NHS. "It is hard for anyone to understand that after years of unprecedented investment, we are dealing with financial problems. Above all, there is a sense that the service no longer knows where it is going."

She confirmed that the great majority of hospitals would remain publicly owned, but they will be "owned by the public rather than government," as NHS foundation trusts. She said that the NHS should use independent providers if they can provide better care and value for patients.

Unease has been growing about the potential closure of

hospitals after David Nicholson, who took up the post of chief executive of the NHS earlier this month, said that there would be up to 60 "reconfigurations" of services. These will reduce the number of hospitals offering full emergency, paediatrics, and maternity services, he said.

Cuts in these services are proving unpopular with health-care professionals, as well as the general public. Barry Monk, a consultant dermatologist at Bedford Hospital NHS Trust, said that he will stand for parliament as a Save Bedford Hospital candidate at the next general election. His announcement came after the suggestion that Bedford Hospital could close within three years as a result of NHS changes.

"The real issue is the relentless and ill thought out avalanche of change, directives, and guidelines

that have flooded down," he said. "Much of it is change for change's sake. It is time for people to say 'enough is enough.'"

Responding to a story in a Sunday newspaper (*Observer*, 17 September, p 1) saying that the BMA supported the government's plans for a mass "reconfiguration" of hospital services, James Johnson, chairman of the BMA, said that that was not the case. "The BMA has not given its backing, or signed up to government plans to close up to 60 hospital departments across England," he said. "It is right that we have a public debate about the way our health services are delivered in the future, but any reconfiguration of services, if that is what is needed, must be properly planned and should involve the views of local clinicians and patients," he added.

British doctors call for independent scrutiny of Guantanamo Bay detainees

Caroline White *London*

A group of British doctors has fiercely criticised the Foreign Office for what they term its "shameful silence" on the detainees held at Guantanamo Bay, which "reflects the collusion of this country in a war crime," they say.

In an open letter to the *Times* (2006 Sep 18, p 18), the 120 signatories condemn the Foreign Office for its failure to send an independent medical team to visit the eight British residents currently held in Guantanamo Bay.

The letter also criticises the lack of discussion of Guantanamo by either the Foreign Office pro bono medical or legal

panels in more than four years.

The signatories include two members of the Foreign Office pro bono medical panel, as well as representatives from the Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture and the Muslim Doctors and Dentists Association.

At its annual representatives meeting in June, the BMA passed a resolution that the UK government should seek "direct and unfettered access" to those being held, and it condemned the force feeding of prisoners on hunger strike. The Medical Foundation for the Care of Victims of Torture said that it would be willing to field experts.

British doctors have condemned the Foreign Office for failing to send a medical team to visit British residents held at Guantanamo

Dr David Nicholl, a consultant neurologist at City Hospital, Birmingham, and one of the letter's signatories, told the *BMJ* that he had contacted his local MP, Clare Short, about the issue.

Former foreign secretary Jack Straw, replying in March to inquiries made by Ms Short, said

there was "no specific committee" in the Foreign and Commonwealth Office looking at prison conditions of British nationals overseas. "Our consular operation is tasked with ensuring that [their] medical and welfare needs are met and their human rights are respected," he wrote.