

Health Watch: A Conservative Proposal for Patient and Public Involvement

The NHS deserves a powerful new mechanism for patient and public involvement in health.

Under our proposals, “Health Watch” would be an independent, national body with the power to monitor the NHS and to refer patients’ concerns to a wide range of authorities.

Overall, its role would be to promote the interests of all NHS patients by: -

- a) Being a voice for patients on all NHS issues
- b) Investigating and reporting on the effective delivery of NHS services
- c) Providing a mechanism through which informed public opinion influences the regulation of healthcare

To carry out this role, Health Watch would have, among others, the following specific functions: -

1) To represent the interests of patients as consumers to the healthcare regulator

Under Conservative proposals, Monitor would be an independent, pro-competition regulator of the health service responsible for licensing providers – including those from the private and voluntary sectors. All providers would be required to adhere to NHS prices and contract terms and to operate in accordance with NHS standards and clinical guidelines.

The main function of Health Watch would be to provide a voice for the consumer in relation to the exercise of pro-competitive functions by Monitor. Health Watch would help to ensure that the structure and features of the market in healthcare maximise the quality of patient care.

Monitor would consult Health Watch on the terms of a provider’s license and, more importantly, on the terms of its renewal after any problems have been identified.

Health Watch would also have the power to submit complaints to Monitor in cases where the structure of the market or the conduct of agents within it works against the interests of consumers. Providers would therefore be under great pressure always to have regard to patient interests.

To achieve its aim of championing patient interests in the design of the market, Health Watch would have the means to monitor and investigate the health service and to hear from patients when they have concerns – including when NHS services are being reconfigured.

2) To represent the interests of patients to the NHS in strategic commissioning

Under Conservative proposals, most commissioning would be undertaken by GPs or by groups of GPs acting on behalf of patients. Ordinarily, Health Watch might not become involved in very local decisions. However, there will continue to be a role for

strategic commissioning in the NHS – particularly as new clinical guidelines mean service developments, as capital funding is required to support new services, and for new medical technology and other high cost/low volume interventions as and when they become available.

At a strategic level, Health Watch would have the power to make a case for different commissioning priorities when it believes patient interests are not being best served. Health Watch would therefore have a responsibility to find out – through surveys and other means – the priorities and views of local people and to represent these views, complementing the duty on NHS organisations to consult.

3) To monitor the NHS and disseminate information nationally and locally

Health Watch would have an investigative and accountability function – with the statutory power to enquire, make visits, receive information about the NHS, and possibly even call NHS witnesses for questioning. Health Watch would have the freedom to decide its programme of work.

As well as obtaining information for its own use, Health Watch would make this information widely available so as to facilitate meaningful patient choice, promote accountability in the widest possible sense, and help local people identify areas of provision where their needs are not being best served.

Health Watch would have the power to refer matters to the Healthcare Commission acting as auditor of the NHS in cases where NHS providers were under-performing, not meeting standards of care set by NICE, or not making a prudent use of public money.

4) To pursue and refer individual or collective patient complaints

Health Watch would assist patients in lodging a complaint with the provider, express an interest in the case, and lobby the NHS to take the complaint seriously. It should also be the body to bring together collective complaints, which would then be referred to the individual Trust concerned or to the Healthcare Commission (if the nature of the complaint is national or involves several NHS organisations). Health Watch would then help to ensure that the actions which need to be taken in order to respond to a complaint are effected, and it would be able to refer the matter back to the Healthcare Commission if they are not.

5) To contribute to public debate about the NHS at a national level

Health Watch would be empowered to voice the concerns of patients to Ministers, local authorities, political parties, and the media. We would aim to avoid a situation in which Health Watch represent a single viewpoint as being the definitive view of all patients. Its role would be to ensure that a range of views is put forward in order to reflect the different concerns patients have.

By making high-profile interventions in public debate, Health Watch would establish itself as a strong, independent brand, inspire the confidence of patients, and encourage members of the public to come forward with information and views at a local level.