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Health in the news

It would not be exaggerating to say that the NHS dominated the UK news in January. Alan Milburn gave what he called his most important speech since taking office. In it he announced radical proposals to bring private management teams into failing hospitals, while leaving hospitals who are 'star performers' to their own devices (see 'Redefining the NHS').

We then saw the media following nine patients – looking for all the world as if they were off on holiday as they boarded a Eurostar train – to Lille in France for cataract and joint operations (see 'Operation continental'). This arrangement, it is hoped, will take some of the strain off NHS waiting times.

But by far the greatest stir was caused by a 94-year-old woman, who, according to her family, had been badly treated at the A & E department of a large London hospital. She just happened to live in the constituency of the Conservative leader, Iain Duncan Smith. Enter Mr Duncan Smith on her behalf, using the case to illustrate the alleged deteriorating state of the NHS. There followed days of media attention as Iain Duncan Smith, Tony Blair, the patient's family and the hospital staff all voiced what they considered to be 'the facts' (see 'Never let the facts spoil a good argument').

The 'yuppie disease' ME has finally been acknowledged as a medical condition by doctors (see 'ME recognised as a real illness'). Multiple sclerosis patients, unfortunately, have suffered a setback as NICE has refused to have the drug beta interferon prescribed on the NHS (see 'Bad news for MS sufferers').

In future individual heart surgeons will have their performances monitored, as a direct result of the Bristol Inquiry into children's heart surgery. January also saw an outbreak of gastric flu, which spread from hospitals in Scotland to the south of England – see these and other stories in our 'in brief' section.

Redefining the NHS

Radical plans to allow managers from private industry to run failing hospitals in England have been criticised by MPs and unions. Private management teams could be brought in to manage failing NHS trusts in an overhaul of the way England's hospitals are run. Meanwhile hospitals who are 'star performers' would be given greater control over their affairs – including the right to set local pay rates with staff. Health Secretary Alan Milburn announced the radical proposals in what he called his most important speech since taking office. However, just hours after Mr Milburn's speech, backbench Labour MPs voiced 'grave concern' about government health policy – their anger being reflected in a rebellion during the Commons debate. The Conservatives say the measures have not been thought through. Shadow Health Secretary Dr Liam Fox said, 'This is actually a panic measure, designed to head-off further criticism of Alan Milburn's appalling mis-management of healthcare.' Health service unions fear backdoor privatisation of the NHS. John Edmonds, general secretary of the GMB union said, 'It is staggering that at a time when the failure of rail privatisation is there for all to see, the government is intent on making the same mistake with our hospitals.'

Outlining the plans Mr Milburn said the thirty-five three-star trusts could become autonomous, self-governing 'foundation hospitals' with the ability to spend their money as they see fit. They would have the option of establishing themselves as not-for-profit companies and would be able to appoint consultants as they see fit, without consulting a central body. External NHS managers and the private sector will be invited to take over the running of poor-performing units – probably those which received no stars in last autumn's performance tables. Mr Milburn said the job of government should not be to run the system but to oversee it. He wanted greater community ownership and less state ownership, leading to greater diversity in local services.

• *Health Service Journal* 24th January, BBC Online, Press release (DoH)

Never let the facts spoil a good argument

Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith was rather too



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quickly recently to criticise the NHS. In a bitter political row, which dominated the news for days, he used the case of a 94-year-old patient at Whittington hospital in London to illustrate the poor service of the NHS, and demanded an apology from Prime Minister Tony Blair and Health Secretary Alan Milburn. Mrs Rose Addis had been admitted to Whittington hospital with a head wound. Relatives said she was left unwashed and caked in blood for three days in casualty – but the hospital insisted that she received appropriate treatment. However, Mr Duncan Smith failed to check the facts with the hospital before raising it in parliament, which infuriated Whittington's Professor James Malone-Lee. He in turn came in for some criticism when it came to light that he had been a member of the Labour party for twenty years and publicly backed campaigns against Conservative health policies, before Tony Blair came to power. Although Professor Malone-Lee insisted that he kept his political beliefs separate from his professional role, Dr Liam Fox, the Conservative health spokesman, accused him of unprofessional behaviour, smearing Mrs Addis family and using his position to further his political ends. Dr Fox defended his party's leader saying that it was 'quite legitimate' for Mr Duncan Smith to raise the case, adding that the way the government was reacting to the issue implied that it was no longer acceptable to criticise the NHS. Health Minister Hazel Blears retaliated by saying that it was 'quite appalling behaviour' on the part of the opposition to raise the story without 'checking the facts'.

As the bickering rumbled on Tony Blair accused Iain Duncan Smith of using the case of Mrs Addis as part of a deliberate strategy to convince voters that the NHS was 'not worth saving'. The Prime Minister then went out of his way to praise the commitment of NHS staff and 'forward looking unions'. This speech was welcomed by public sector workers who saw it as a departure from a speech three years ago when Mr Blair complained of 'the scars on my back' from trying to reform the public sector. In retaliation Mr Duncan Smith accused Mr Blair of using the health workers as a 'human shield' and insisted he would continue to highlight individual cases. Senior members of his party, however, urged their leader to tone down his attacks on the government as a *Times* survey suggested he had so far failed to make an impact with voters.

All this arguing came as the independent think-tank team, the King's Fund, said an NHS Corporation should run the health service rather than ministers having a day-to-day role. The report, 'The Future of the NHS', written by Labour peer Lord Haskins, says the NHS currently suffers from too much political control and centralisation and too little responsiveness to patients' needs. The discussion paper proposes that the NHS Corporation would be responsible for allocating funds, regulation and set-

ting standards across the health service. The government would be left to concentrate on providing funding and controlling health policy.

- BBC Online, *The Times* 26th January

Operation continental

The first patients to receive treatment in continental hospitals to reduce NHS waiting times have had their operations in France. Nine people journeyed by Eurostar to Lille for cataract and joint operations. The patients were outnumbered at least three to one by journalists and television crews; TV viewers watched their departure from Ashford in Kent and their arrival in La Louviere hospital. Managers in the south-east of England refused to reveal how much the trip is costing, but said it was cheaper than paying for surgery privately in the UK. They plan to send 200 patients abroad at the taxpayers' expense by the end of March. The decision to use foreign hospitals to tackle waiting times was made by Health Secretary Alan Milburn last October, after a European court judgement which said that patients had the right to be referred elsewhere in the EU if they could not get treatment without 'undue delay' in their home country. Mr Milburn said the vast majority of patients would continue to be treated by the NHS. Ten more patients were expected in Lille the weekend after the first tranche. Peter Huntley, chief executive of the Channel Primary Care Group in Dover, who negotiated the French contract, expects to open a second front somewhere in northwest Germany.

- BBC Online, *The Times* 19th January

Bad news for MS sufferers

NICE, the National Institute for Clinical Excellence, has decided that patients with multiple sclerosis should not be given beta interferon on prescription. Patients' groups said the news was devastating. Ken Walker of the MS Society said, 'We have repeatedly argued that the measures of cost effectiveness NICE has used are inappropriate for a fluctuating lifelong condition like MS.' Although treatment with beta interferon could benefit about 10,000 of the 85,000 MS sufferers in Britain, only about 2,000 are being treated with it because some health authorities believe that its benefit is not great enough to justify the cost of £6,500–£8,500 per patient annually. The decision by NICE confirms a preliminary ruling last summer that 'on the balance of their clinical and cost-effectiveness' beta interferon and another new drug, glatiramer acetate, should not be available on the NHS. Glyn Wright of Teva, one of

the drug companies involved in the appeal said, 'MS is a very unpleasant disease. This will effectively mean that patients in the UK won't get drugs on the NHS that they would get if they lived in North America or elsewhere in Europe.'

• *The Times* 26th January

A weighty problem

A charity has been launched to help people struggling to cope with weight problems and the discrimination they face from society. Weight Concern has been set up by a group of psychologists and nutritionists. The organisation has secured Department of Health funding to develop and evaluate treatment programmes for overweight children. It will also be evaluating a self-help assessment and treatment guide for overweight adults called Shape-Up. More than one in two British adults are now overweight, and one in five are obese, making Britain one of the heaviest nations in Europe. Obesity rates are also rising in children, having nearly doubled in the past decade. Professor Peter Kopelman, who runs the obesity clinic at the Royal London Hospital said, 'The frequency of obesity in the UK means that it should now be considered an epidemic with serious medical consequences that afflict all ages.'

A Commons Public Accounts Committee has recently published a report on obesity. It says that it costs society £2.5bn a year and unless effective action is taken, one in five men and twenty-five per cent of women could be obese by 2005.

• BBC Online, Press release (DoH)

ME recognised as a real illness

Chronic Fatigue Syndrome (CFS) or Myalgic Encephalomyelitis (ME) has been given official recognition by the government. Describing the poorly understood condition as 'real, debilitating and distressing', Sir Liam Donaldson, the Chief Medical Officer, said that doctors could no longer tell sufferers they did not believe in the illness. He was speaking at the publication of a report by a government-appointed working group, giving the first firm guidance to professionals on how to treat and manage the condition. Chris Clark, chief executive of Action for ME, one of the biggest patient groups, welcomed the report as a 'major breakthrough in understanding the illness', but said he was disappointed that the government had not earmarked any money for treatment.

An estimated 150,000 people in Britain suffer from the illness, which causes profound, lasting exhaustion, severe

muscle pain and neurological problems such as loss of memory. CFS/ME has been at the centre of so much controversy that experts cannot even agree on what to call it or what causes it. Four leading experts and two patient representatives on the working group that produced the report refused to sign it, saying that they were unhappy that it played down the psychological and social aspects of the condition and concentrated on a medical model. With so little known about the condition the report had also failed to provide the straightforward answers that many GPs had hoped for. The Medical Research Council is to develop a strategy for advancing research on CFS/ME. The report can be seen on www.doh.gov.uk/cmo/publications.htm.

• *The Times* 12th January, *BMJ* 5th January, Press release (DoH)

Smoking can seriously damage your health

Most people with a smoker's cough do not realise it could be a symptom of a fatal lung disease. A survey shows that three quarters of the one in five smokers with a persistent cough are unaware that it could be an indication they are suffering from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD). The Mori survey, commissioned by the British Thoracic Society (BTS) COPD Consortium, consulted 866 adults aged fifteen to fifty-four and found two-thirds had not heard of COPD, despite the fact that it kills twenty times more people a year than asthma. Dr Michael Rudolf, chairman of the consortium said, 'These results confirm our fears that awareness and understanding of COPD is low – even though it causes a huge amount of suffering and kills over 30,000 people a year in the UK.' The BTS is re-launching a campaign, 'Trouble with breathing?' to encourage people with worrying symptoms to see their GP.

The government has launched a new TV advertising campaign to encourage potential quitters to ring the NHS Smoking Helpline. Since the service began in June 2000 it has received over 315,000 calls.

• BBC Online, Press release (DoH)

Legislation to protect genetic information

Volunteers donating blood samples to a proposed 'genetic databank' must be protected by legislation, say the campaign group GeneWatch UK. Under new plans Biobank UK would collect blood samples, in order to carry out investigations to see which genes are linked to certain diseases. This could result in new medicines and tests for

genetic conditions. GeneWatch UK warn that without legal safeguards, information could fall into the hands of private companies, who may misuse it by patenting genetic information for their own use. There is also the possibility that genetic tests determining who might be susceptible to certain diseases may also be developed, which might be used to discriminate against people thought susceptible to certain conditions. The first samples are likely to be taken from men and women aged between forty-five and sixty. No start date for collection has been set, and it would be years before research could lead to medicines.

Secretary of State for Health Alan Milburn has announced plans for the first national network of Genetic Knowledge Parks, which he said, would put Britain at the leading edge of advances in genetic technology. This could transform treatments and services for NHS patients. 'The potential is immense,' said Mr Milburn, 'Whilst genetics will never mean a disease-free existence, greater understanding of genetics is one of our best allies in the war against cancer.'

- The wrong women may be referred to cancer genetics clinics meaning that those at higher risk – women with a strong family history of cancers such as breast or ovarian – may be forced to wait. Researchers at the Cancer Research Campaign and Imperial Cancer Research Fund say that many GPs err on the side of caution and send on low-risk patients – with weaker family histories – rather than counsel them themselves. Experts from the two charities are to provide GPs with an information pack, which will help GPs, decide, who to refer and who to deal with themselves.
- BBC Online, Press releases (DoH)

Remember German measles?

Britain is on the verge of stamping out rubella, otherwise known as German measles. In the last quarter of 2000, the most recent period for which data have been published by the Public Health Laboratory Service, there was not a single confirmed case in England and Wales. Although GPs diagnosed 1,600 or so cases that year, only nine cases were confirmed. Rubella has become so rare that GPs are no longer skilled at diagnosing it. Pat Tookey, of the Institute of Child Health in London said that eradication would be 'incredibly difficult' and warned that cases would start rising again if children were not immunised with the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccine.

The Medical Research Council (MRC) has published a major review of research, which reveals that the preva-

lence of autism is higher than had been thought, but indicates no association with the MMR (measles, mumps and rubella) vaccination. The review was commissioned by the Department of Health in March 2001, partly in response to public concerns raised by research alleging that MMR vaccination might be linked to an apparent increase in the numbers of children with autism. The MRC review of autism research is available on its website: www.mrc.ac.uk.

- *BMJ* 5th January, *The Times* 23rd January

New concerns about landfill defect link

Worries over a link between living near landfill sites and birth defects have been fuelled by a new study published in *The Lancet*. The study has suggested there is a forty per cent higher risk of congenital chromosomal abnormalities such as Down's syndrome, for people living close to the sites. It also reveals fresh data from a 1998 study, which shows a thirty-three per cent increase in the risk of non-chromosomal anomalies, such as neural-tube defects and cleft palates in people living near landfill sites. Researchers from the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine said their latest study should lead to more work on the suggested link. The team looked at 245 cases of chromosomal anomaly and 2,412 healthy individuals who lived near twenty-three landfill sites across Europe. The study covered two areas in the UK – Essex and Mersey – and information was taken from the England and Wales Down's syndrome register. Environmental campaigners Friends of the Earth are calling for government action to reduce the use of hazardous landfill sites, in the light of the latest study.

- BBC Online

Patient waiting targets and bed blocking

Latest figures show that two thirds of NHS trusts have achieved the government's aim of having no patient wait longer than fifteen months – four months before the deadline for all trusts to meet the target. The average waiting time in England fell from 2.97 months in October to 2.85 months in November. Health minister, John Hutton, said, 'The health service is making real progress on waiting times, but there are challenges ahead. By April patients should not be waiting longer than fifteen months.'

To help the bid for shorter waiting times Health Secretary Alan Milburn has launched a drive to expand day surgery in the NHS. Around fifty per cent of hospital op-

erations are undertaken as day surgery – where a patient undergoes an operation without an overnight stay in hospital. While some hospitals achieve over sixty per cent, others only achieve half of that or less. Leading surgeons believe there is scope to close this gap, partially through the use of diagnostic and treatment centres which will carry out day surgery.

A third of patients whose hospital discharge is delayed take up a hospital bed unnecessarily for more than twenty-eight days. Such is the problem that Health minister Jacqui Smith has announced the allocation of £200m to councils to end the unnecessary delayed discharges. Councils received £90.5m in November to tackle the problem; the length of time people have waited for discharge has dropped by ten per cent since September.

• BBC Online, Press release (DoH), *The Times* 12th January

In brief

– Following agreement with the Society of Cardiothoracic Surgeons, the performance of individual heart surgeons is to be published as part of a drive to create a more open, patient-centred NHS. The move is part of the government's response to the report of the public inquiry on the Bristol Royal Infirmary. Health Secretary Alan Milburn announced that information on death rates within thirty days of surgery would be published for every cardiac surgeon in England from April 2004. 'Learning from Bristol: The Department of Health's Response to the Report of the Public Inquiry into children's heart surgery at the Bristol Royal Infirmary 1984–1995' is available on the internet at bristolinquiryresponse.doh.gov.uk/bristolinquiryresponse.

• BBC Online, Press release (DoH)

– A study published in *The Lancet* suggests that newborn babies who need intensive care are more likely to die if they are cared for in busy units. The UK Neonatal Staffing Study shows that babies admitted to units running at full capacity are fifty per cent more likely to die than those who go to units which are half full. Whether the unit is large or small does not have an impact on how well babies fare, but where there are fewer consultants, babies are less likely to undergo invasive surgery and are consequently less at risk of infection. The study looked at whether a range of factors, including patient volume, staffing levels and workload, were linked to death and brain damage rates and the incidence of hospital-acquired bacterial infection. Researchers studied 13,500 infants admitted to 54 randomly selected units across the UK. There were just under 400 deaths in hospital; sixty-five of which were attributable to conditions

present at birth or complex heart surgery.

• BBC Online

– Aspirin could save thousands of lives each year if it was administered more often, according to a new study published in the *British Medical Journal*. The study was funded by the British Heart Foundation and the Medical Research Council. Although aspirin is well known in helping to prevent heart attacks and strokes, less than half of high-risk patients are prescribed the drug. Aspirin and other blood-thinning drugs are almost always prescribed to patients who have suffered an acute heart attack or unstable angina. The new study says still more lives could be saved by using aspirin more widely. Dr Colin Baigent, the MRC scientist who led the research said, 'This study shows that aspirin is beneficial in an even wider range of conditions than previously believed. What we now need is to ensure that aspirin, or some other anti-platelet drug, is routinely considered for patients who might need it.'

• BBC Online

– Last month saw an outbreak of gastric flu in Britain which spread from hospitals in Scotland to the south coast of England. Twelve hospitals in Scotland were affected, and hospitals in Manchester, Hertfordshire, Sussex, Dorset and Cornwall reported cases. The Public Health Laboratory Service said that levels of the virus were higher than those recorded in the past. A spokesman said it was impossible to pinpoint specific areas of the outbreak or confirm the amount of patients involved. Medical experts stressed that the viral outbreak was not related to hygiene; gastric flu was very common and affected around three million people in the UK each year.

• *Daily Mail* 23rd January

– More people die from the cold weather in Britain than in any other European country, including Siberia. Up to 50,000 more people die in the UK during the winter months than in the summer, according to new research. Professor William Keatinge, of London's Queen Mary and Westfield College said, 'Many people here simply do not take the cold seriously and appreciate the danger it poses. Simple things like wrapping up warm and keeping moving when hanging about in the cold really can save your life.' The charity Friends of the Earth has called for a national programme to fight fuel poverty, for example through better insulation. Coordinator Martyn Williams said, 'This research highlights once again the scandal of excess winter deaths in Britain.'

• BBC Online

– GPs are opposing calls to widen the prescribing of heroin

to addicts, fearing it could create 'addicts for life'. Last October the Home Secretary, David Blunkett, announced that the Home Office and Department of Health would draw up new guidelines for supplying heroin on prescription to addicts. Some senior police officers believe it could reduce the amount of drug-related crime, but the Royal College of General Practitioners has told a session of the home affairs select committee that it is against the idea. Doctors' reluctance to prescribe heroin is emphasised by the findings of a survey by Imperial College in London. It found that fewer than half of those entitled to hold a licence to administer the drug had applied for one, and also that the Home Office list of prescribers was inaccurate. At the moment around 300 addicts around the country are prescribed heroin; it would cost up to £15,000 per year to fund their prescriptions, money which GPs feel could be better spent in improving treatment programmes to help addicts stop taking drugs altogether.

- BBC Online

- The Chief Medical Officer, Sir Liam Donaldson has announced that the vaccine which protects against meningitis C is to be made available to all under 25-year-olds who have not previously received the newest vaccine. The vaccination campaign is being extended following advice from the Joint Committee on Vaccination and Immunisation. The campaign so far has been highly effective in those under twenty years, but the overall risk of meningococcal infection is still twice as high in people aged between twenty and twenty-four years as in the rest of the adult population. The British Medical Association has welcomed the initiative.

- Press release (DoH), BBC Online

- A recent survey of 91 health authorities in England and Wales shows that less than half the population is registered with an NHS dentist. Conservatives have seized on the results, as in the NHS Plan the government stressed that it was firmly committed to making high quality NHS dentistry available to all who wanted it by September 2001. The British Dental Association believes difficulties of access are a symptom of the underlying problems affecting NHS dental care provision. A spokesman for the Department of Health said, 'In line with the Prime Minister's pledge...we have been working with the British Dental Association and, backed by additional investment, good progress has been made.'

- BBC Online

- Measures are being taken to stamp out institutional racism in the health service in Scotland, including setting up an ethnic minority resource centre to monitor the

treatment of patients and the recruitment of staff. The measures follow publication of a report by the Scottish Executive, 'Fair for All', which examined current policies and practice throughout Scotland. Although it did not find evidence of individual racist behaviour, it uncovered wide variations in practice and a lack of awareness among NHS leaders of ethnic minority health issues. Scotland's ethnic minority population at the 1991 census was 1.3 per cent, with sixty per cent resident in the four main cities, where they make up three to five per cent of the population. 'Fair for All' is available at www.scotland.gov.uk/publications.

- *BMJ* 5th January

- Public Health Minister Yvette Cooper has welcomed the decision by the Court of Appeal that embryos created by cell nuclear replacement – cloning – are covered by the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Act 1990 after all. The appeal was brought by the Department of Health following a Judicial Review in November 2001.

- Press release (DoH)

- During the next two years 335 teams providing intensive support for people with severe mental illness will be set up all over the country to help people through periods of crisis and breakdown. The teams are part of a £300m package of mental health service improvements over the next two years. Health minister Jacqui Smith said, 'By 2004 100,000 people will be treated in their own homes who otherwise would have been admitted to hospital.'

- Press release (DoH)

- As spring approaches pregnant women are being advised to avoid close contact with sheep during lambing periods. The Department of Health, the Department for the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and the Health and Safety Executive have issued a joint report advising pregnant women of the potential risks to their own health and that of their unborn child, from infections that can occur in some ewes. It is stressed, however, that the number of reports of these infections and human miscarriages resulting from contact with sheep are extremely small.

- Press release (DoH)

- A public education campaign has been launched to tackle common misconceptions about which illnesses can be treated with antibiotics. The key message is that antibiotics don't work on colds, and the majority of coughs and sore throats. The campaign also explains that unnecessary use of antibiotics, where they are not needed, will lead to more bacteria becoming resistant to them

and kill the good bacterial that live normally in the body. The £700,000 campaign includes adverts in national newspapers and magazines, and posters and leaflets displayed in GP surgeries and pharmacies.

- Press release (DoH)
- Incompetent care workers could be barred from practising under the industry's first codes of conduct. The codes – one for employers, one for employees – are part of an industry overhaul hoped to prevent further tragedies such as eight-year-old Victoria Climbié, who died after months of abuse from her great aunt, despite having ongoing contact with social workers. The General Social Care Council will oversee the new industry regulation. It is thought to be the first time in the world such regulation of social care has been attempted, and it is being closely

- watched by officials in the US, Australia and Europe.
- BBC Online

Appointment

Alan Milburn, Secretary of State for Health, has announced the appointment of Professor Gordon Duff to the post of Chair of the National Biological Standards Board (NBSB). The Board has statutory functions for the standardisation and control of biologicals used in medicine, and for associated research and development. Professor Duff is Florey Professor of Molecular Medicine, Director of the Division of Molecular Medicine and Research Dean at Sheffield Medical School; and a Research Director, Faculty of Medicine at the University of Sheffield.

- Press release (DoH)