

Challenging Fowler - press reports

Statisticians scorn Fowler's NHS activity figures

by Lynn Alleway

A group of statisticians has poured scorn on the latest batch of NHS activity figures produced by the Department of Health.

The publication of the latest statistical bulletin by Health Secretary Norman Fowler has been timed to coincide with the Conservative Party Conference in Blackpool this week.

The figures, said Mr Fowler, 'spell out the growing scale of services provided to patients.'

Mr Fowler, whose party is becoming increasingly sensitive to bad publicity over the NHS, listed the key improvements and successes in activity, and added: 'This is the real news about the health service.'

The bulletin covers the years from 1974-84 but Mr Fowler highlighted figures for 1984, which, he said, show: inpatient cases up 2.6 per cent; day cases up 11.0 per cent; new outpatient attendances up 1.4 per cent; new

accident and emergency attendances up 2.6 per cent; total accident and emergency attendances up 1.2 per cent.

Mr Fowler said: 'These figures are the best measure of what the health services is achieving.'

But, according to Gavin Ross, a member of the Radical Statistics Group, the figures are far from complete and do not present the true picture at all.

He pointed out that the continued use of figures citing

the number of cases (defined by the Department as discharges and deaths) is misleading as they do not show how many cases involved the same patient making more than one visit.

Similarly, the fact that accident and emergency attendances have risen may simply be a result of people in for example, central London, having problems in seeing a GP. And the figures in no way show whether need is being met, Mr Ross added.

Health and Social Service Journal, October 10, 1985

Fowler figures were inaccurate—Owen

By David Hencke, Social Services Correspondent

An attack on claims by Mr Norman Fowler, the Social Services Secretary, that he was providing record levels of care in the National Health Service has been launched separately by Dr David Owen, leader of the Social Democrats, and medical statisticians working for the health service.

Dr Owen, in a speech to a Royal College of Nursing conference in London, yesterday accused Mr Fowler of being "outrageously inaccurate" in claiming that record numbers of patients were being treated.

The Radical Statistics Group, which represents left-wing statisticians working for the health service, accused him of being "dishonest and misleading" in publishing selected statistics.

Mr Fowler made his claims last week in a Department of Health press release.

Dr Owen, quoting sources as diverse as the all-party Commons social services committee and the British Medical Jour-

nal, accused Mr Fowler of deliberately misleading the public. He said that government claims that health spending had risen by 17 per cent over four years were proved wrong by the all-party report — which showed it was nearer 4 per cent.

Claims that new hospital beds had increased by 11,000 had been disproved by the British Medical Journal which had shown beds had decreased by 12,900, said Dr Owen. Claims that full-time nurses had risen by 13 per cent were wrong because their role of nurses had been redefined — reducing the increase to 5 per cent.

He said: "The sadness is that the Government select facts, manipulate facts, to exaggerate rather than defend their actual record."

The Radical Statistics Group accused Mr Fowler of using "double counting" to boost the number of patient cases by ignoring both how many times people go to hospital and also increasing re-admissions to mental hospitals.

Fowler's NHS 'is the best'

By David Hencke, Social Services Correspondent

Mr Norman Fowler, the Social Services Secretary, released statistics last night to show that the national health service was better run and provided more services under his control than under any other minister since 1948.

The figures, released before next week's Conservative party conference, use patient attendance and out-patient appointments to show that record numbers of people are being treated.

They do not show how many hospital cases involve the same patient making more than one visit, or how many out-patient appointments cover one patient.

Using these figures Mr Fowler says there were 6.18 million patient cases in 1984 — 800,000 more than in 1978 and one million more than 1974. There were 37 million out-patient attendances in 1984, 3.1 million more than in 1978 and 3.7 million more than 1974.

Mr Fowler also singles out the growing numbers of elderly people receiving hospital treatment, up by 112,000 in 1978 and 161,000 in 1974.

Figures for the mentally handicapped and mentally ill do use numbers of people. These show that numbers in long stay beds have fallen by 35,000. No figures are given for people being looked after in the community.

Mr Fowler says 24 new hospitals have been built since 1979, and 250 are being planned, designed or built. No figure is given for how many hospitals have been closed since 1974, or 1978.

Mr Fowler says: "These figures are the best measure of what the health service is achieving. It is time the achievements of health service staff were fully recognised. It is time they were given credit for the progress they have achieved. This is the real news about the health service."

Copies of DHSS Statistical Bulletin 5/85 available free from DHSS Information Division Cannon's Park, Government Buildings Honeypot Lane, Stanmore, Middlesex.

Guardian 4/10/85

Getting the message across?

One suggestion which emerged from the series of meetings about monitoring health services cuts mentioned in the Health Group report was that we should put out a press release responding to the minister's speech in the health debate at the Tory Party conference. People in the know assured us that it would be packed with statistics presented in the way we had come to know and criticise over the past few months.

With more than a little help from our friends, we found out that the debate was on the morning of Thursday October 10, when Barney Heyhoe would be replying to the motion:

'In response to persistent adverse criticism of "cutbacks" affecting all levels of the NHS causing widespread public concern and erosion of confidence, this conference urges the Government to counteract effectively the charges of a health service in decline.'

Before this we had found out that a DHSS Statistical Bulletin¹ containing hospital activity data for 1984, which would be likely to feature in the speech, was due to be published in September. When it wasn't, a phone call to DHSS press office revealed that it 'wasn't yet ready' but would be in mid October. The delay could well reflect the tightness of resources in DHSS' statistical divisions and the fact that everyone misses publication deadlines at some time or other. All the same, it was not very surprising to find that it was ready for publication in time for the Tory Party conference, and was the subject of a press release² sent out by DHSS late on the afternoon of October 3.

We were alerted to it when Lynn Alleway from Health and Social Services Journal rang Gavin Ross to ask for his comments and also through an article by David Hencke in the Guardian³. Our own attempts to lay our hands on the press release and bulletin revealed that most people who had received the press release had not got the bulletin and this included the Guardian. This was interesting in view of the very selective way the data in the bulletin were used or ignored in the press release.

Lynn Alleway kindly gave us copies of both and advised us to respond to the press release rather than waiting for the conference speech. This we did, with much help from various friends. The evening of October 8 was spent throwing together, typing, photocopying and delivering a press release which made the following points:

Norman Fowler claimed 'record figures from the health service' in the DHSS press release. This was based on increased numbers of in-patient stays and out-patient attendances at hospitals which he described as 'the best figures of what the health service is achieving.'

This is highly dubious as individuals can be counted more than once if they are discharged from hospital more than once in a given year. The DHSS has admitted that it does not know how often this double counting occurs⁴. What is more, these statistics do not reveal the extent to which treatment is successful, let alone whether or not the health of the population is improving or whether it is being adversely affected by Government policies in other areas such as housing, social security and employment.

What is left out?

The DHSS press release gave the numbers of new hospital schemes built, but not the number closed. A better measure of hospital

provision is the 'average daily number of available beds'. The bulletin shows that these decreased by 18,600 between 1979 and 1983 and by a further 8,600 in 1984. Many people might consider this an improvement if the hospital beds lost were replaced by increased resources for care in the community, but no evidence is given of this.

Norman Fowler's press release also fails to mention that NHS staff numbers decreased as a result of 'manpower' cuts in 1983. Evidence given to the House of Commons Social Services Committee⁵ reveals a loss of 11,000 staff, including 3,100 nurses between March 1983 and March 1984.

Are the statistics timely?

Most of the statistics quoted relate to December 1984, well before the latest pay award to nurses. Since the cost of the rise was greater than the Government had budgeted for, many health authorities had to make cuts elsewhere to fund this and other staff pay rises⁶. The NHS will, in any case, not feel the full impact of the nurses' pay award until the next financial year, so further cuts seem likely then.

Can we believe the statistics?

We do not suggest that the statistics have been falsified. Instead, the DHSS Press Release selected, presented and interpreted statistics in a dishonest and misleading way to present a picture which is at complete variance with people's everyday experience of the NHS in 1985.

For example, in it Norman Fowler said that under the present government, the NHS has more resources than ever before, '20 per cent more in real terms than in 1978/79'. What he did not say was that half this rise had already taken place by 1981, and his real terms adjust for general inflation, but do not tell us that, in fact, the NHS' purchasing power in terms of goods and services rose by only 8.2 per cent. There is no evidence that this was enough to cater for the growing numbers of elderly people and developments in medical technology to which the Press Release refers.

To conclude, it was suggested that DHSS ministers should heed the warning given in an article written by Sir John Boreham, just before he retired in July from being Head of the Government Statistical Service:

'Where necessary we should try, by logic and diplomacy to persuade colleagues and ministers of the risks of losing public confidence they would run if they suppressed delayed or misused our statistics, or selected figures to satisfy their particular social, economic or political viewpoint'

References

1. DHSS. NHS hospital activity statistics for England 1974-1984. Statistical Bulletin 5/85. London:DHSS, 1985.
2. Record figures from the health service - Norman Fowler. DHSS Press Release 85/274. October 3 1985.
3. Hencke D. Fowler's NHS is the best. Guardian, October 4 1985.
4. Written parliamentary answer. Hansard May 13 1985, col34.
5. House of Commons. Sixth report from the Social Services Committee, session 1984-1985. Expenditure on the social services. London:HMSO, 1985.
6. Davies P. How will HAS foot the pay award? Health and Social Services Journal, September 12, 1985, 1124-1125.
7. Boreham J. Integrity in the Government Statistical Service. Statistical News 1985;68:19-20.

HEALTH GROUP - report

As a follow up to 'Unsafe in their hands', published in the last newsletter, we did an abridged version which has been published as a leaflet by the Socialist Health Association, with the title 'Statistics in unsafe hands'. The longer version has reappeared in full in 'Medicine in society', and in an edited version in 'Maternity Action', the bulletin of the Maternity Alliance. The International Journal of Health Services wants to reproduce both Norman Fowler's leaflet and our response. We have agreed, but wonder what Norman Fowler will think!

We were to have had a meeting in that well known geographical centre of the universe, Sheffield, but have postponed it until it can be better planned and combined with a recruitment drive. Meanwhile we have decided to go on with our project on debunking myths about the National Health. Some progress, but not a spectacular amount, has been made.

A series of meetings organised jointly by people from Women and Work Hazards, BSSRS and the Health Group, has brought together a variety of people to discuss how or if it is possible to monitor the extent of cuts in the NHS. The first was mainly of people from trades unions, the second of people working in the NHS or academic institutions and the third was of people working for voluntary organisations. The first two were very well attended and all three brought forth constructive ideas. Now the original organisation is going to meet to draw the ideas together. For further information, contact Jennie Popay (Tel 01 892 0238).

One idea which emerged was that people should try to respond in their various ways to the speech at the end of the health debate at the Tory Party conference. We set the ball rolling with a press release about the statistics quoted. Copies were sent to all those who were invited to the cuts meetings suggesting that they might like to add their own particular angle to it and respond in whatever way they thought appropriate. The way we tried to do our bit is described in a separate article. It is too soon at the time of writing to assess whether it was in any way effective.

Alison Macfarlane

FOWLER'S FIGURES — R.I.P.

Being in a generous mood we are happy to announce the winner of another competition, this time for the best suggestion about what to do with Norman Fowler's brilliant leaflet on NHS facts and figures — a publication which we understand deluged health authorities not so long ago.

In this age of blistering efficiency the leaflets obviously had to be put to some use and a special £10 prize goes to the following entrant whose letter is published in full below.

6 Sir — As a self effacing administrator, I always put myself at the end of our hospital's

circulation list for the *Journal* and so am too late for your competition about what to do with Norman Fowler's leaflet. I would nevertheless like to put forward a suggestion to warm the heart of a cost-conscious Secretary of State.

Some time ago I realised that our district house journal was in great demand in the mortuary. On tackling one of our pathologists, I was told that it was ideal for packing skulls whose brains had been removed at post mortem examination.

What better use than to fill empty heads with doctored statistics!

I would give my name but as our ID just been vetoed from the general manager appointment I do not wish to earn brownie points in the great scramble. Yours, anon⁹

As we have slightly changed our anonymity in order to protect our r from the 'reign of terror' the author's identity is being withheld. However, since obviously general manager material would, for the usual agency fee, be passed his name on to any districts who having trouble finding a general manager conforming to Mr Clarke's whims.