

Non publication of DHSS statistics

In its various activities over the past year, the Health Group has repeatedly criticised DHSS both for its selective use of some statistics and its failure to publish the rest. To take this a step further, we sent the letter which follows to professional organisations concerned with statistics and/or health care to draw their attention to the problem and ask them to take action such as approaching DHSS. We also sent a copy to Health and Social Service Journal, which is concerned about this issue as part of the wider non-availability of information about the NHS. This resulted in a full page article.

So far, we have had a number of replies. The President of the Royal College of Psychiatrists, Thomas Bewley (husband of a community physician!) replied that he would take the matter to two of his committees. The Institute of Health Services Management replied that it is 'very much aware of the importance of accurate information and is ever mindful of government misinformation', but did not promise to do anything.

The British Medical Association came out with the rather amazing statement that, 'We are as you will appreciate in a privileged position as regards statistics on all aspects of health care, being the recognised trade union representing all doctors working in the National Health Service. We are thus entitled to, and for the most part do, receive such statistics as are necessary either automatically or on demand.'

They did, however, agree with our points as regards lesser mortals and said they would take the matter up. The other two letters received so far came from bodies that are aware that some of us belong to them. The Society for Social Medicine, in suggesting that the problem extends beyond DHSS, wondered whether to take it up at a committee meeting in May or the AGM in September. The other letter came from the Royal Statistical Society (RSS).

Our informants tell us that our letter provoked a lively debate at the Council of the RSS, some of whose members were also concerned about the non-publication of statistics in other fields. Other members, however, were concerned about the lack of signatures on our letter, while yet others seemed to be worried lest we might try to signal the outbreak of world revolution by putting a brick through the windows of the Society's hallowed premises.

After this, the President, John Nelder, wrote to us asking us to set out our points in more detail and ensure that 'any future correspondence clearly comes from a named individual'. We are replying, enclosing a list of points which the RSS can send to DHSS with a covering letter signed by as many people as possible.

Meanwhile we are delighted to announce ..... a U turn :

30 APRIL 1985

Written Answers

Health and Personal Social Services

Mr. Meacher asked the Secretary of State for Social Services why "Health and Personal Social Services Statistics for England" was not published in 1979, 1980, 1981, 1983 or 1994 and if there are any plans to publish it in 1985 or subsequent years.

Mr. John Patten [pursuant to his reply, 25 April 1985 c. 557]: The 1978 edition of "Health and Personal Social Services Statistics for England" was published in 1980. Subsequently, the publication was put on an ad hoc, rather than annual, basis and a volume was published in 1982. The possibility of further publications in this series is under consideration. The formal volumes of statistics produced by the Department have recently been complemented by the introduction of "Statistical Bulletins," four of which have been published to date. These allow a particular topic area to be covered in greater depth than is practicable in a volume of statistics such as "Health and Personal Social Services Statistics".

3 DECEMBER 1985

Written Answers

Health and Personal Social Services Statistics

Mr. Ryder asked the Secretary of State for Social Services if there are any plans to publish health and personal social services statistics for England in 1985.

Mr. Whitney: Health and personal social services statistics for England 1985 edition will be published today. I have arranged for copies to be placed in the Library.

11 FEBRUARY 1986

Written Answers

Statistics (Publication)

Mr. Meacher asked the Secretary of State for Social Services what plans he has to publish a volume of Health and Personal Social Service Statistics for England in 1986.

Mr. Whitney: Health and Personal Social Services Statistics for England is now to be published on an annual basis. It is planned to publish the 1986 edition during the summer of 1986.

# Radical Statistics

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January 16 1986

Dr J A Nelder,  
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Dear Dr Nelder,

We are writing to draw your attention to the Department of Health and Social Security's increasing reluctance to publish, in an accessible form, a full range of the statistics it collects centrally about the National Health Service. In doing so, we strongly suggest that you, as a professional organisation, make representations about this to DHSS. So far, no announcements appear to have been made about the publication of data to be collected through the new statistical systems which will be introduced into the NHS in 1987. Thus it is an appropriate time to insist that DHSS publishes up to date nationally aggregated statistics, regularly and in an accessible form and that regional and district health authorities are encouraged to do likewise with their data.

As you may know, 'Health and personal social services statistics for England', which, up to 1977, was a annual publication has only appeared three times since then. After the 1978 volume came out two years late in 1980, two further volumes came out in 1982 and 1985. The 1985 volume emerged very quietly, announced by a written parliamentary reply in Hansard on December 3 - as far as we know, there was no press publicity for it, a procedure hardly likely to encourage sales.

Furthermore, in December, DHSS announced (press release 85/358) the discontinuation of two annual volumes of statistics, 'In-patient statistics from the mental health enquiry for England', and 'The facilities and services of mental illness and mental handicap hospitals in England'. Whatever their shortcomings, these books did have the merit of being published by HMSO, which meant that they could be bought through bookshops. They are being replaced by 12 separately priced booklets which have to be ordered by post from DHSS.

It has been suggested by DHSS that its new series of Statistical Bulletins supersede these annual volumes. While the bulletins show a welcome tendency to incorporate commentary on the statistics they contain, they have other characteristics which are far from desirable. They are restricted to a much narrower range of data than the annual volumes and are much more difficult to obtain. Like the booklets mentioned earlier, they cannot be bought through bookshops or ordered by telephone. Instead, they have to be ordered by post from DHSS, sending cash in advance. Although the bulletins have been compared with the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys' Monitor series, the Monitors are free of charge and are distributed much more widely.

To add to the confusion, some of the bulletins have been announced by press releases containing ministerial statements which bear a very tenuous connection to the data in the bulletin.

Some people are under the impression that the annual reports of the Health Service in England published in 1984 and 1985 have replaced the annual volumes of statistics. In principle, the publication of annual reports is a positive development, but we have grave reservations about the selective and misleading way in which statistics have been used in these two reports to give a very unrealistic picture of the state of the National Health Service.

A worrying result of this is that we increasingly find that people reject statistics as 'damned lies' which are at total variance with their experience as users of or workers in the National Health Service. When he was still head of the Government Statistical Service, Sir John Boreham gave this warning in the February 1985 issue of 'Statistical News'. 'Where possible, 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.'

It would seem that DHSS' reluctance to publish statistics is a result of the 25 per cent cut in the cost of the Government Statistical Service which followed the enquiry done by Sir Derek Rayner in 1981. He also recommended that 'Information should not be collected primarily for publication. It should be collected primarily because the government needs it for its own business' (Cmdnd 8236).

The report on DHSS statistics undertaken as part of the Rayner enquiry recommended that 'Department statistical publications should be produced only where the revenue they yield from sales will cover the full cost...with a saving of £12,000 a year.' In a somewhat contradictory vein, it also said, 'If the price of liberty is eternal vigilance, a good cause can be made for basing vigilance on accurate up-to-date information. Reliable unbiased information raises the level of public debate and checks the worst excesses of prejudice, faction and vested interest which would otherwise predominate. As long as our society accepts and encourages freedom of speech, it should be in everyone's interests to have a blend of information and opinion.'

While we welcome the suggestion made in the Rayner White Paper and elsewhere that detailed and specialised statistics should be made available to research workers and health authorities in computer readable form and on microfiche, this should supplement rather than replace conventional publications which can be bought in or ordered through bookshops. There is also a need for statistics to be presented in a more informative and understandable way than happens in some present publications.

Because we think that statistics have a potentially important role to play in informing public discussion about health and health issues, we hope that you will urge DHSS to review its current publication policy with this end in view. Compared with the cost of implementing the new NHS computers systems, the cost would not be large.

Yours sincerely,

Radical Statistics Health Group

## Figures made to lie in state

Statistics from the Department of Health seem to be drying up, and those that do infrequently emerge appear to be creating a false picture of the NHS, says the Radical Statistics Health Group. Peter Davies investigates

Everyone knows the tired old jokes about statistics. How there are lies, damned lies, and statistics. And how some people use them as a drunken man uses a lamp post — more for support than illumination.

But for a growing number of people in the NHS, quips like these have a mirthless ring.

The source of their cynicism is that fount of statistical knowledge, the Department of Health. For not only is the flow of figures showing signs of dwindling to a carefully controlled trickle, some of it is tainted with a peculiar flavour — more like that of Tory propaganda than of impartial information disseminated for the public good.

The unease about the DHSS's use of statistics is being articulated by the Radical Statistics Health Group, a group made up largely of statisticians and others working in healthcare research and the NHS. It is not affiliated to any political party.

Last month the group wrote to the main professional organisations represented in the NHS to alert them to this worrying trend, and encourage them to take the matter further.

One complaint centres on the sporadic appearance of *Health and personal social services statistics for England* (HPSSS). This was published annually until 1977. But the 1978 volume did not emerge until 1980, and since then only two have been published, in 1982 and 1985.

This publication may not have been very visually exciting, say the DHSS's critics, but it drew together a mass of data in an easily accessible form.

Similarly, mental health statistics were published in two annual volumes that could be bought, like HPSSS, from HMSO. Now they appear in 12 separate booklets, all priced individually, which have to be ordered by post from the DHSS.

Anyone wanting to peruse health authorities' performance indicators has to fork out £45 for a set of floppy disks — as well as



Average daily beds available fell by over 27,000 in five years.

investing in a BBC microcomputer, Torch disk pack, colour monitor and printer. Then much of the information is given in rates and ratios, when actual numbers are often important for interpreting variability.

And ministers have not announced how much Körner data will be published, or in what form. The time is ripe, therefore, says the radical statistics group, to ensure that the DHSS publishes nationally aggregated statistics in an accessible form, and that figures on given subjects are brought together.

The DHSS implies that its new *Statistical bulletins* have superseded the annual volumes.

In fact they cover a much narrower range of data, and are harder to obtain — by cash in advance to the DHSS.

One hopeful sign is that the DHSS announced last week that HPSSS will once again be published annually, with the 1986 edition planned to appear in summer 1986.

Sales figures for the first four *Statistical bulletins* are not impressive. Two months after publication, only one copy of the third bulletin had been sold, and none of the fourth. Priced at £1 each, they contain 13 and nine pages respectively.

Perhaps more worrying is the DHSS's propensity to issue press releases containing ministers' highly selective quotations from

the bulletins, but not the bulletins themselves.

This can prove an effective form of news management. When hospital activity data for 1984 were announced in this way last year, even one national newspaper not usually sympathetic to the Government echoed the Secretary of State's optimistic tones.

This particular bulletin had been expected in September. When it did not appear, the DHSS press office forecast its release in mid October. It was issued on October 3, the week before the Tory Party conference which placed so much emphasis on the favourable 'presentation' of Government policies. Coincidence or conspiracy?

The two glossy NHS annual reports so far produced were welcomed as a promising trend to more open information for the general public. They have sadly betrayed that hope, with selective and misleading presentation of data and diagrams to which no self respecting statistician would attach a moment's credence.

The 1985 annual report was launched at a meeting of the Conservative Medical Society. It has a blue cover and a photograph of Mrs Thatcher on the front.

And to compound that, Secretary of State Norman Fowler issued his leaflet *The health service in England* based

on an even more selective use of figures from the annual report.

The publicity surrounding the launch of the annual reports contrasts markedly with the publication of the last volume of the far more significant HPSSS. It was left to junior health minister Ray Whitney to reveal sheepishly in a written parliamentary answer just before Christmas that it had appeared at all.

It cost the DHSS £9,300 to print its 1985 annual report, and £6,370 for the leaflet.

Ironically, Sir Derek Rayner's review of the Government Statistical Service (GSS) in 1981 identified £12,000 savings if the DHSS drastically curtailed its publications. Rayner proposed a 25 per cent cut in the GSS, designed to save £25m by 1984 and shed 2,500 jobs.

He was widely criticised at the time for ignoring the economic, social and political consequences of his recommendations, and for his lack of consultation with bodies like the NHS.

Since then, the head of the GSS Sir John Boreham warned before he retired: 'We should try by logic and diplomacy to persuade ministers and colleagues 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.'

No one seems to have pressed home this argument at the DHSS. Ministers preface every batch of figures with the assertion that the NHS is treating a record number of patients.

But the NHS knows, even if the public does not, that that figure means little as it ignores readmissions, figures on which are not available.

Ministers constantly stress how many new hospitals they are building. But a better measure of hospital provision is the average daily number of available beds. And this fell from 361,670 in 1979 to 334,513 in 1984. □