

Non-publication and selective publication of government statistics

Since raising this issue at the AGMs of the Society for Social Medicine and the Medical Section of the Royal Statistical Society, the Health Group has not done much more on this subject, apart from finally getting round to replying to the British Medical Association to comment on the letter they had received from DHSS.\* Copies were sent to the Chief Medical Officer and the DHSS statistician involved. As the statistician has now moved to another department, we do not anticipate a speedy reply!

Meanwhile there seems to be a certain amount of activity elsewhere, as can be seen from Paul Allin's letter to us.\*\* In addition, the RSS Medical Section and the Society for Social Medicine have decided to hold a joint meeting on the subject in the summer. The RSS Medical Section has asked me to do their end of the organisation together with someone representing the Society for Social Medicine. Any ideas people have about the ground to be covered and possible speakers will doubtless be very welcome.

Alison Macfarlane

\* see next page

\*\* see p.

# Radical Statistics

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JC Ford,  
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Dear Sir/Madam,

Health and personal social services statistics

Thank you for your letter of August 20, written on behalf of John Havard, and enclosing the letter from Basil Mahon of DHSS to Health Services Journal. Although some time has elapsed, we should like to take up the invitation, made by both Mr Mahon and the Chief Medical Officer, to make constructive criticisms. For this reason, we are sending them copies of this letter, but all the same we hope that the BMA will decide to take up some of the questions yourselves.

Our original letter to you was concerned, above all, with the accessibility of the data published by DHSS, and the fact that most of them are not available via HMSO.

Mr Mahon confirmed that DHSS' main distribution point is its Leaflets Division at Stanmore, but did not answer our criticisms of this arrangement. HMSO publications can be bought in HMSO's own bookshops or from its agents in major cities, where customers can usually look at them before purchase. This is not true of DHSS publications, which have to be ordered by post from Stanmore and paid for in advance. In addition, this letter does not mention the telephone number of DHSS' Leaflets Division. In fact, this is rarely quoted, making it difficult to obtain information about the availability and prices of publications or how soon orders can be fulfilled. These problems could be eased if DHSS' publications were distributed via HMSO for sale in bookshops.

We should like to comment on some of the more detailed points in the letters from DHSS:

1. Health and personal social services statistics for England  
Our letter to you was written before DHSS' welcome announcement on February 11 that it had gone back to publishing this annually. We hope that this decision will now be adhered to. It would also be helpful if greater efforts were made to publicise this volume. The 1986 edition was published, with a press release, on July 23, the Royal Wedding day. We would question whether this was the optimal time to get press coverage for this very useful but not exactly spectacular book of statistics.

2. Statistical bulletins  
These suffer from the fact that they have to be ordered individually from Stanmore. As a result, as the enclosed extract from Hansard (July 10 1986) shows, the numbers sold are small, ranging from 39 to 165. Even when the 200-350 copies distributed free of charge are added to this, the total numbers distributed compare very unfavourably with most OPCS Monitors, whose circulation lists run to several thousands. It is true that OPCS Monitors, which are free of charge, are usually much shorter than DHSS' bulletins, but OPCS puts more detailed analyses in its annual reference volumes, and in its quarterly journal 'Population Trends', which is available on subscription. We suggest that DHSS adopts a similar strategy for circulating its basic data more widely while providing more in-depth analyses elsewhere.  
It is sometimes difficult to get an accurate impression of the contents of DHSS bulletins from reports in the press. Apparently some journalists, including those

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working for 'serious' publications receive press releases about the bulletins but not the bulletins themselves. May we suggest that sending them the bulletins as well might improve the quality and relevance of press reports.

3. 'In-patient statistics from the Mental Health Enquiry' and 'Facilities and services of mental illness and mental handicap hospitals in England'  
Basil Mahon's letter mentions a readership survey of these volumes. As there is a tendency for people to consult annual reference volumes such as these in libraries rather than to buy their own copies, we wonder how DHSS took the views of library users into account. Could it be that their needs were different from those of people who bought the volumes individually to use the same specific tables each year?

Although we have not been able to do a systematic survey, we have had difficulty in finding the new booklets in libraries. We have found libraries which took the old reference volumes through standing orders to HMSO, but are unaware that the data are still published and have to be ordered from DHSS. While the 12 booklets for 1983 cost libraries a total of £10.00 compared with a total of £14.00 for the two old reference volumes for 1982, the difference is likely to be partly offset by the cost of binders to keep the booklets together.

We should like to see DHSS revert to the practice of producing annual reference volumes published by HMSO, but we think that many potential readers would find them more useful if their scope was widened. Given the changes taking place in services for people with mental handicaps and mental illnesses, it would be useful if a wider range of data about the relevant services and their users were brought together in common volumes. These could include data about facilities and services provided by community health and social services alongside data relating to the use of both specialist and general hospitals.

4. Presentation of statistics in annual reports of the NHS  
These reports, together with the two leaflets, 'The health service in England' and 'The health service today' have been distributed far more widely than the statistical publications referred to above. Yet neither Mr Mahon nor Dr Acheson responded to our criticisms of the misleading and sometimes technically incorrect way many of the statistics in these publications are presented. It may be, of course, that they do not have any responsibility for this matter. Perhaps you might be interested in ascertaining where the responsibility does lie and then in making representations to the appropriate part of DHSS.

We hope that the BMA will pursue some of these questions further, as a wider availability and improved presentation of statistics is likely to lead to a better informed public discussion of the many pressing problems facing the National Health Service.

In particular, we would suggest that OPCS' policy of distributing small amounts of data free of charge to a wider audience in its Monitor series while publishing nearly all its reports and reference volumes through HMSO is more effective than the use of the more limited departmental facilities of DHSS' Leaflets Division. Of course, there are newer ways of publishing which we have not mentioned here and which we hope the Government Statistical Service will explore to complement rather than replace its range of paper publications.

We look forward with interest to your reply.

Yours faithfully,

Radical Statistics Health Group

cc: Dr E D Acheson ) DHSS  
B H Mahon )



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Your reference

Our reference

Date 10 December 1986

Dear Colleagues

## THE DISSEMINATION OF GOVERNMENT STATISTICS

As promised, I proposed to the Statistics Users' Council last week that the SUC should hold a seminar on the dissemination of Government statistics. There had been particular questions on the availability, quality and content of DHSS statistics. While there was considerable interest in this, the SUC agreed to consider such a seminar only after a first seminar on the presentation of statistics, which is being planned, possibly for early in June 1987.

It was felt that at least some of the concern over the dissemination of statistics may be covered in the seminar on the presentation of statistics. Moreover, members of the SUC thought that the issues might also be discussed elsewhere, in particular:-

- i) Jack Wells from the Central Statistical Office mentioned the possibility of an RSS/GSS Study Group Meeting on the DHSS questions: while the Study Group programme has yet to be finalised, this would seem to be a good forum in which to discuss your concerns;
- ii) the 1987 Statistics Users' Conference (18 November 1986) will be on "Quality of Life Indicators". You may be interested in making a contribution;
- iii) we heard of a possible MRC seminar on health and income - would this have resulted from the Society for Social Medicine discussion?

So, although we cannot immediately offer an SUC seminar on the dissemination of Government statistics, I hope you agree that there should be a number of other occasions at which these important issues can be discussed.

Copies of this letter go to John Nelder, Janet Trewsdale and Derek Harding at the RSS, Jack Wells at the CSO and Bernard Benjamin and Ian Maclean of the SUC.

Yours sincerely

*Paul Allin*

PAUL ALLIN  
(One of the RSS representatives, Statistics Users' Council)