Report of the Health Service Commissioner – Selected Investigations
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The first point to be stressed is that the cases reported here are 'selected'. One does not wade through pages of utter triviality which must have discouraged readers of some of the early Commissioner’s reports. The cases reported here, or at any rate most of them, are worth reading.

The selection has been, wittingly or otherwise, most delicately balanced. The Commissioner usually concludes by upholding, or not upholding, occasionally dismissing, a complaint. I counted 41 complaints upheld, and 40 not upheld or dismissed.

Complaints reported cover a wide range. Non-availability of previous medical history; burns and scalds; unsatisfactory accommodation for a private patient; mishandling of complaints by health authorities and by a Family Practitioner Committee; delay in an accident and emergency department; general nursing care, and time and time again, inadequate communications with relatives.

Few complainants had but one complaint. One had no fewer than 11 and most had three or four. Few had all their complaints upheld, and few had all dismissed. The vast majority then of these complainants had, in the Commissioner’s view, something to complain about.

One complaint alleged inadequate supervision of a known suicide risk. Following a suicide attempt a young woman of 24 had an emergency operation and four days later jumped from a ward window on the fifth floor of the hospital, sustaining injuries which proved fatal. The patient’s father complained that he had told the nursing staff and a doctor that his daughter had threatened to jump from a window, despite which she was left unsupervised in a room with no safety catches on the window.

Following what was obviously an exhaustive investigation – no fewer than 17 members of the nursing staff were interviewed – the Commissioner concluded that the patient had been treated with sympathy and concern, and that the father had not mentioned the danger of the window as forcefully as he subsequendy believed. Supervision had been adequate. In his final comments the Commissioner made a statement very similar to one I recall being made by Lord Denning in the Court of Appeal, namely that it is almost impossible to prevent a really determined patient from taking his life.

What good does all this do? Well, it illustrates the points which, rightly or wrongly, do upset patients and relatives. The complaint about the suicide was not upheld, but the Commissioner expressed the hope which all will share, that the report would reassure the complainant regarding his daughter’s care.

Sometimes an apology, and occasionally a reimbursement is recommended. Sometimes the actions of doctors, nurses and others are referred to in favourable terms – and indeed no longer does this reviewer advise doctors that in dealing with the Commissioner they are on a hiding to nothing.

As to whether justice is achieved – and if it can be by the Commissioner’s procedure why do we need civil courts – these are not questions for a review.

The publication should be read by all concerned with patient care, and it doubtless would be read by very many more if it were reasonably priced.

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