Modernised ombudsman service needed

Last month we strongly welcomed two reports by the Public Administration Select Committee, one calling government departments to learn from complaints and the second calling for a more straightforward ombudsman service.

Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman Julie Mellor supported PASC’s report More Complaints Please! which called for learning from complaints to be embedded in the culture of government departments and agencies.

The committee’s second report Time for a People’s Ombudsman Service echoed our calls for a simpler ombudsman service that allows people to bring their complaints about government services to us, without the need for an MP referral. It also supported our calls to investigate areas of concern without having to receive a complaint first, so that we can use our powers to help the most vulnerable.

This month we published our own review of how well UK government departments and agencies work with us, entitled The Parliamentary Ombudsman’s review into complaint handling 2013.

The review includes the nature of complaints we investigated and how well departments and agencies worked with us to put things right. Our case work illustrates the impact that failures in public services can have on the lives of individuals and their families. Cases include the stories of a child who had to wait nearly ten years before their immigration application was decided, an individual who had their medical records shared inappropriately and a sexual assault victim whose suffering was compounded by mistakes in their treatment.

Julie Mellor said: ‘We will be carrying out research into how departmental boards are engaging with complainants and using complaints to learn and improve the way they work and look forward to working with the Cabinet Office and all government departments and agencies to make services better for the public.’

Correction:
Ombudsman service for private healthcare patients needed

Our last issue of Resolve dated February 2014 incorrectly stated that private healthcare patients had “no access to an independent and impartial judgement on complaints about private healthcare”.

This is incorrect and it should have made it clear that private healthcare patients do not have access to an ombudsman service. They can, of course, go to the Independent Sector Complaints Adjudication Service (ISCAS). We apologise for any confusion.
More investigations about the NHS and government organisations

Our end-of-year performance statistics have revealed that, following changes in how we handle complaints, we have achieved a five-fold increase in the number of complaints we investigate about the NHS and government departments.

In 2013-14 we investigated 2,199 cases, compared with 384 in the previous financial year. Almost 80% of these investigations were about the NHS and the rest were about UK government departments and their agencies.

Our ambition is to investigate around 4,000 cases a year by the end of 2014-15.

Last year, following feedback from customers, staff, organisations and Parliament, we changed the way we handled complaints so we could help more people by investigating more complaints.

We are also making it easier for people to make a complaint to us. By the summer, customers will be able to submit their complaint to us online.

In July we will start to publish anonymised summaries of our completed investigations on our website, so that as many people as possible can learn from our investigations, to secure improvements in our public services.

Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman Julie Mellor said: ‘I am determined to make the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman as open and transparent as possible’

‘I am determined to make the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman as open and transparent as possible and that’s why I’m pleased to announce that this year we will begin publishing statistics on our performance on a monthly basis for the first time, as well as summaries of our investigations.’
Local Government Ombudsman joins our board to ensure closer working

The Local Government Ombudsman Dr Jane Martin has joined the unitary board of the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman to ensure closer working between the two organisations.

The two ombudsman services - the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman (PHSO) and the Local Government Ombudsman (LGO) - already carry out joint investigations.

But both are calling for a single Public Services Ombudsman to handle complaints about all public services, including health and social care in England.

Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman Julie Mellor, who is already a member of the LGO’s board, said: ‘I am delighted that Dr Jane Martin has joined our board. We are both committed to securing a Public Ombudsman Service that is more accessible for the public, more useful for Parliament and better value for money. Working more closely together will help us to achieve that.’

‘We want complaints about public services to be handled by one ombudsman service so that a complaint can be dealt with by the same organisation throughout the complaints process.’

The PHSO investigates complaints about NHS services and government departments and their agencies, whilst the LGO investigates complaints about councils, other authorities and organisations including school admissions appeal panels, and adult social care providers such as care homes.

Dr Martin joined the board as a non-executive member on 1 February 2014 before attending her first board meeting on 25 March.

‘I am delighted that Dr Jane Martin has joined our board.

Learning disabilities
Complain for Change campaign kicks off

Our campaign Complain for Change, which aims to raise awareness of our services for people with a learning disability, kicked off with a YouTube video and leaflets in hundreds of GP practices across the capital.

This is the first time that simple and accessible information has been provided for people with a learning disability in GP practices on how to make a complaint.

The two and a half minute video, which is hosted on YouTube and being screened by advocacy groups such as Mencap, shows the frustration faced by a young man with a learning disability when he tries to book a double appointment at a GP practice.

He is refused a double appointment after he says that he needs a longer consultation to allow him more time to understand what the doctor tells him.

The video explains why people may not be happy about their healthcare. For example, if they did not feel listened to, if they were not treated with respect or if information was given to them in a way they did not understand.

For more information visit www.complainforchange.org
Older people are some of the most frequent users of the NHS but they are less likely to complain about their treatment and care when standards slip to unacceptable levels, our casework has shown.

Almost 80% of all the investigations we carry out are about NHS services. And even though nearly half of NHS care and services is given to older people, only a third of the health complaints we investigate are about the care of older people.

Our research shows that a quarter of older people don’t know where to go to complain about the NHS, despite using the service more often than people under 65.

Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman Julie Mellor wrote an opinion piece for the Daily Mail’s Dignity for the Elderly campaign last month, calling for older people not to suffer in silence.

‘Our role is to investigate complaints without taking sides and make recommendations to put things right,’ she said. ‘But older people’s reluctance to complain, coupled with their not knowing where to go to make a complaint, could mean we are just seeing the tip of the iceberg of serious failings in the care of people who are 65 and over.’

Of the cases we do see, there are common themes running through the complaints about the care of older people. Misdiagnosis, staff attitudes, poor communication with patients and families, substandard nutrition, and patients not being treated with dignity, are just some of the common themes.

Making a complaint should be easy and transparent and people should be supported to do so.

Only with a significant change in attitudes towards complaints and a drive to reforming the complaints system will the NHS make the improvements it needs to ensure all older people are treated with dignity and respect.
Want to know more?

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Improvements needed in NHS complaint handling

The Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman has submitted vital evidence to the health select committee's inquiry into complaints and raising concerns.

The inquiry will investigate how complaints from patients and the public, and concerns raised by staff, are handled across the NHS.

Poor complaint handling means there are missed opportunities to learn from mistakes, which can then lead to more substantial problems.

We receive 10% of NHS complaints and in 20% of these cases, the NHS fails to offer adequate explanations when things go wrong.

Complainants tell us that they want to see three things when things go wrong: a clear explanation, an acknowledgement of the mistake and an assurance that action has been taken to ensure the same failing will not occur again.

Yet poor communication and inadequate responses continue to be a theme throughout our casework.

Good complaint handling requires strong and effective leadership. A culture of defensiveness in the NHS often means that valuable lessons are not learned. Careless communication, insincere apologies, an occasional lack of courtesy, and unclear explanations have led to a failure of trust amongst the public.

Poor complaint handling means there are missed opportunities to learn from mistakes, which can then lead to more substantial problems.