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AvMA deeply regrets Government plans to abolish much anticipated reforms to the Coroner's justice system

On Tuesday 23 November the Public Bodies Bill reaches the committee stage at the House on Lords, in it three key reforms, contained in the Coroners and Justice Act 2009 are set to be abolished in an apparent attempt to save costs.

The proposal is to abolish the role of Chief Coroner, the appointment of medical examiners to assist Coroners and a complaints and appeals process. The 2009 Act, welcomed by all organisations who support families at inquests, was designed to bring a system up to date and in line with accepted modern expectations of civil justice that had seen no change in its legal basis since the mid 19th century. Each coroner works in his or her separate jurisdiction, there is no consistency of approach over the country. Without a Chief Coroner there will be no central system of overview or means of hearing complaints or appeals (unlike in our civil and criminal courts). The decision not to appoint medical advisers will perpetuate the assumption that coroners will only seek expert advice in exceptional circumstances despite a clearly recognised need for such advice in many circumstances.

AvMA joins with other NGOs, including INQUEST and the Royal British Legion in urging the government to reconsider its decision not to implement these vital reforms. We also urge peers to support Baroness Finlay of Llandaff's amendment to schedule 1 of the Public Bodies Bill which will remove the reference to the abolition of the Chief Coroner's post and associated officers.

As part of its campaign for patient safety and justice AvMA provides representation for many families at inquests where deaths have arisen during medical treatment. As such we have been involved advising those bereaved by deaths at the Gosport Memorial Hospital and Stafford Hospital where it was only at a late stage that the unusually high death rates became apparent. Our hope had been that with the appointment of a Chief Coroner and a system of overview and reporting, envisaged as one of the key functions of the role, problems like this would be identified earlier.

Catherine Hopkins AvMA's Legal Director said

"Without a Chief Coroner the opportunity for a uniform coronial system with a consistent approach, which is fair to all bereaved families will be lost. The abandonment of plans for a proper appeals process from coroners' decisions (leaving costly Judicial Review as the only option) is a fundamental denial of access to justice, something that was designed to be put right by the 2009 Act".

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