

PRESS RELEASE

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**NATIONAL AUDIT OFFICE REPORT ON NHS COMPLAINTS
CONFIRMS PATIENTS' FEARS**

Action against Medical Accidents (AvMA) - the charity for patient safety and justice - has welcomed the publication of the National Audit Office report on NHS complaints, published today, saying it confirms their own experience but does nothing to diminish patients' fears about the robustness of the proposed new system.

AvMA chief executive, Peter Walsh, said:

"The report confirms our experience that the majority of patients do not complain and most who do, do not have their complaints done justice. Critically, the NHS misses opportunities to learn lessons from complaints to improve safety and quality. Whilst the NHS Complaints Procedure is about to be reformed, no one should be under any illusion that the situation will improve overnight. In fact, the situation could be made worse in the short term because of lack of resources and planning for the transition.

Our biggest concern is the adequacy of arrangements for independent review of complaints, given the planned abolition of the Healthcare Commission. The Commission is already haemorrhaging complaints staff which will lead to problems and we are not convinced that there will be enough staff based with the Ombudsman to deal with independent review when the new system kicks in, in April 2009. We agree with all the intentions of the reforms but it is simply not good enough to wish local resolution of complaints to be better and assume it will happen. There should be guarantees that anyone needing an independent review of their complaint will get it. That will mean guaranteeing that the Healthcare Commission and Ombudsman are resourced to deal with at least the current numbers of requests for independent review, and that this capacity is not reduced until we see an actual reduction in demand for independent reviews. There seems to be a naïve assumption that this demand will automatically reduce. The Department of Health should have learnt its lesson from the debacle when the Healthcare Commission was first created and the demand was far greater than they were resourced to cope with."

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