



PRESS RELEASE

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AvMA demands rethink of proposed scrapping of post of Chief Coroner

Action against Medical Accidents ('AvMA' – the charity for patient safety and justice) has joined forces with other charities to demand the establishment of the post of Chief Coroner, which the Government plans to scrap under the controversial Public Bodies Bill, currently going through Parliament.

Following a great deal of careful consideration, consultation and three extensive reviews of the coronial system it was apparent that it was crucial to create the post of Chief Coroner if the coronial system was to be made fit for purpose in 21st century.

The Coroners and Justice Act 2009 made provision for the position of Chief Coroner. Last October, before the position even became effective, the government announced that they could not afford to introduce a Chief Coroner; the post was promptly included in the Public Bodies Bill to be disposed of.

Fortunately the House of Lords rejected the government's attempts to abolish the post outright and the position survives albeit the government intends to try and re-insert it in Schedule 5 Public Bodies Bill so it can be dismantled instead. The Bill has its second reading on 12th July. There is little doubt that if bereaved people are to be offered any hope of meaningful change to the coronial system a Chief Coroner needs to be appointed as soon as possible.

Although the government has cited cost as the reason for removing the post (£10 million start up costs and £6.5 million annual running costs thereafter), they have not been able to produce any evidence to substantiate those figures. Certainly they have given no consideration to the human cost of the excessive and unnecessary delays so often experienced by the bereaved, or the lack of recourse to any sort of appeals system other than the expensive and time consuming remedy of judicial review.

No consideration has been given to the desperate need for a system which makes coroners accountable or the inconsistent approach shown to basic steps such as providing the family with statements or relevant documents prior to the inquest hearing.

Lisa O'Dwyer, AvMA's Senior Caseworker & Inquest Advisor said:

"It is probable that had a Chief Coroner been in post, national scandals such as Harold Shipman or more recently Stafford Hospital might well have been identified earlier. Lives might well have been saved. What price do you put on a life? What about the cost to the country of the inquiries which then follow? In the case of Shipman alone the government footed a bill for £21 million. The Stafford Inquiry is still ongoing, it will be some time before we know the cost of that but one thing is certain, it will be substantial. And how many unnecessary hospital deaths might be avoided if there was a proper system of reporting so that repeated failures or unusually high death rates could be identified and dealt with at an early stage?

The simple truth is, the Government can't afford *not* to appoint a Chief Coroner."

AvMA's concerns are echoed by many other non governmental organisations such as INQUEST and Royal British Legion all of whom have direct, first hand experience of the defects in the current system.

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