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A Digest of Current Social Information

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WILFUL NEGLECT OF PATIENTS

I don't know if anyone else has said this, but is there not a case that politicians who cut NHS funding or reorganise services can cause neglect and be considered 'wilful'? Pot and kettle?

FROM TINA MEEGAN

In my role as Employment Specialist in the NHS I am working with an experienced administrator who is looking for either full-time or part-time work. She lives in the Victoria area and cannot really travel too far beyond West London. I just thought I would put out an alert in case any of you come across a position and need within your contacts.

If you need a CV at any time Elizabeth would be happy to send.

A NEW MINISTER FOR DISABLED PEOPLE

Mike Penning MP has taken over this post. You will understand that I view this ministerial role in the light (sadly extinguished) of its first incumbent and dear friend, Alf Morris, who was wholeheartedly *for* disabled people. The enthusiasm of more recent holders of the title is less certain. Indeed, Frances Ryan (*Guardian*, 6 November) goes so far as to say: "These are the times when opposition is called for. The victims of this coalition are waiting to be defended. All we have now is a minister against disabled people."

NEW HOPE FOR THE INDEPENDENT LIVING FUND

A case taken to the court of appeal by five disabled recipients of support from the Independent Living Fund has succeeded. The judges ruled that in seeking to close the Fund there had been a failure by the government to comply with its public sector equality duty under the Equality Act 2010. The DWP has said that it will not appeal this decision, but will invite ministers to reconsider the way forward based on further advice.

ANTI-SEMITISM

I commented on this historical enmity in *Briefing* no.57, May 2013, concluding that such hostility appeared to be dying out in Britain. Not so, it seems, in Europe generally (including the UK, but excluding Bulgaria, Cyprus, Estonia, Luxembourg, Malta, Portugal, Slovenia and Romania). A survey of nearly 6,000 people carried out by the European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights found that three quarters of those polled thought that anti-Semitism is rising, with growing fear of online abuse. Some 46 per



cent were worried about verbal insults, discrimination, harassment and even physical violence because they were Jewish.

<http://fra.europa.eu/en>

A ROUND UP OF MAGAZINES AND OTHER MEDIA

The Week

From time to time, *The Week* carries in-depth articles. One such, in the issue for 2 November, is of particular interest, focusing on Britain's Court of Protection, which is described as "the most secretive court in the land". It is mainly concerned with making decisions regarding the property and affairs of those lacking the mental competence to make their own decisions: typically people with dementia or mental impairments. Under court rules hearings are held in private, a practice that has increasingly come under attack in recent years. It is argued that notwithstanding the sensitivity of the issues, the court's deliberations should not be entirely free of public scrutiny. The article concentrates on the views of Sir James Munby, President of the Family Division in the court system, who has suggested that it is time for the Court of Protection to abide by the same rules as the rest of the family court system, and become more transparent, as a guard against bad decisions. Matters such as ordering people into or out of care or being forced to accept medication against their will, it stresses, can be highly contentious.

The Guardian

31 October: The government is to announce that data will be collected and published on the performance of doctors in 10 new areas of medicine. As part of providing greater openness in the NHS, patients will be asked to gauge their satisfaction after treatment.

Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt announces a reorganisation of accident and emergency services in north-west London. Two hospitals will lose their A&E departments, to be replaced with urgent care centres for less serious treatment. Improved services are promised at other hospitals in the area. This news was followed by a statement from the National Audit Office that too many patients are being admitted to hospital via A&E departments when they could be better treated elsewhere. More doctors are needed in A&Es to cut back on avoidable emergency admissions to wards.

The Supreme Court has found against an appeal by the Department of Work and Pensions against an earlier ruling that in two specific cases orders to work required under the government's 'back to work' scheme had been legally flawed. Although the court did not accept that the scheme had involved forced labour, the 2011 regulations creating the programme were held to have been inadequate. The department has subsequently introduced emergency legislation to remedy the deficiencies, a response that is now being challenged as retroactive.

1 November: Suggestions that the DWP's welfare reform programme is experiencing difficulties appear to be confirmed by a report by Shiv Malik. Leaked documents indicate that consideration is being given to two options for rescuing the Universal Credit project, with a warning that either way only 0.2 per cent of all benefit recipients will be transferred on to the programme by the next general election. Malik reports that, according to sources close to the project, senior civil servants have raised concerns that the 2017 deadline is now unrealistic. As a leading article points out this news comes on top of a succession of embarrassing failures. [It has subsequently been reported that equipping benefit claimants with the skills they will need to access the system is likely to cost hundreds of millions of pounds].

Polly Toynbee notices that the widespread fall in real wages has hardly made it on to the political radar. Yet the number of working people earning less than the minimum living wage calculated by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation keeps on rising. The social crisis, she argues, is pitiful pay, not welfare dependency. Yet "passivity reigns in the face of gross injustice".

2 November: According to the *Inside Housing* magazine the number of London families being housed in other parts of the country has risen by 129 per cent in this year's first financial quarter. Welfare reforms, especially the benefits cap of £500 a week, have made it increasingly difficult for councils to house people in private rented accommodation in the capital.

Interviewed by Decca Aitkenhead, Michael Mansfield QC inveighs against cuts in legal aid. The current annual bill of around £2bn, he argues, isn't too high: "peanuts" compared to what they're spending

on banker's bonuses. Nor is it true that the current system has led to frivolous pursuits of justice; they are a tiny, tiny, tiny percentage of cases. The fact is that coalition cuts have caused many lawyers to abandon legal aid work altogether. Looking more widely at the political scene, he thinks that "democratic accountability is almost non-existent". What has been going on over the last, say, 25 years – probably longer – leads him to say to himself that there has to be a democratic revolution.

4 November: Keir Starmer QC, now *former* Director of Public Prosecutions, interviewed on BBC1's Panorama programme, argues strongly that there should be a mandatory legal requirement to report child abuse allegations, a view not shared by the Department for Education.

A report by the Royal College of Midwifery, Nursing and Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, the Unite union and Equality Now recommends strong action to end female genital mutilation in the UK. More than 66,000 women in England and Wales have suffered in this way and more than 24,000 girls are at risk of it. Yet there has not been a single prosecution.

Shelter reveals that in England today, 2,090 families with children are living in emergency bed and breakfast accommodation, an increase of 8% on 2012 and the highest level for almost ten years.

5 November: Polly Toynbee complains that, under Michael Gove, English literature is to be removed from the core GCSE exam and relegated to becoming an optional extra.

6 November: Another hospital – Colchester General – faces allegations of malpractice. A Care Quality Commission investigation has disclosed claims that staff were bullied and pressured into falsifying records relating to patients' cancer care, so serious as to be referred to the police.

The Lord Chief Justice, Lord Thomas, has disclosed plans to launch a consultation on whether veils – presumably the Islamic niqab – can be worn in court.

The College of Emergency Medicine warns that patients could die because of "toxic overcrowding" of A&E units. The College's president, Dr Cliff Mann, said that the NHS is 600 consultants short of the 2,000 it needs to provide a consultant-led A&E service at every hospital for at least 16 hours a day every day. Units were also operating with only half of the number of registrars they need.

The Press Association reports on a case at Preston Crown Court in which three carers are accused of mocking, bullying and assaulting elderly residents at Hillcroft, a Lancashire nursing home.

This issue also has a thoughtful, full page article discussing the prospects for the integration of NHS and social care.

7 November: Confirmation today of the DWP's difficulties in progressing the Universal Credit scheme. The Public Accounts Committee says that failures are expected to waste at least £140 million of public money, to be written off from failed IT work. The scheme is said to have been overseen by "alarmingly weak" management. The committee also raised doubts about the prospects of delivery by the 2017 deadline. And described a pilot as inadequate and open to fraud. Margaret Hodge, the committee's chair, described the system's implementation as "extraordinarily poor", with extensive delay. "From the outset, the department, [under the ministerial guidance of Iain Duncan Smith], had failed to grasp the nature and enormity of the task; failed to monitor and challenge progress regularly; and, when problems arose, had failed to intervene promptly."

The Office for National Statistics predicts an increase of 15 per cent in Britain's population in the next 25 years, from 63.7 million to 73.3 million, with a sharp rise in the percentage of older people. By 2037, about 16.1 million people are expected to be eligible for a state pension.

8 November: A National Audit Office report reveals that some maternity units in England are struggling to cope, because of a shortage of 2,300 midwives, combined with the highest birth rate for forty years. In parts of the service, units have had to resort to temporary closures or even turn expectant mothers away. The NAO also reports that almost a fifth of maternity funding, around £700 per birth, is being spent on clinical negligence insurance cover.

Polly Toynbee's column is given over to Iain Duncan Smith's alleged "epiphany: from compassion to brutality".

9 November: The Nuffield Trust health 'think tank' has told a parliamentary inquiry that "many hospitals face severe and potentially unsustainable financial pressures" and are therefore at risk. The drive to make £20 billion efficiency savings by 2015 is creating an unprecedented NHS-wide cash squeeze.

Page 26 has a potted profile of the new Director of Public Prosecutions, Alison Saunders. She told *The Guardian* that her priorities involve improving communications with victims, upgrading the quality of casework and investing in training and development inside the organisation.

11 November: Monitor, the health service regulator, reports that 53 NHS walk-in clinics (of 230) have been closed in the three years since the coalition came into power. This despite their popularity and the fact that they relieve pressure on A&E units. And more are at risk.

In a speech to members of the South Norfolk constituency party, former Prime Minister, John Major, has hit out at the dominance of power enjoyed by the privately educated and affluent middle classes. Further embarrassment was provided by the father of Danny Alexander MP, who described the 'bedroom tax' as "particularly unfair".

12 November: A report by the Royal College of Nursing suggests that because of the drive to save £20 billion by 2015, NHS hospitals are short of 19,526 nursing posts, and that this is putting patients lives at risk.

13 November: Sir Bruce Keogh, Medical Director NHS England, announces plan for a two-tier A&E service.

A Labour motion to abolish the 'bedroom tax' was defeated, but two LibDem MPs voted for the motion, and others abstained.

Admissions for alcoholic liver disease have risen by 92 per cent – up to 50,000 in England. And the Department of Health says that alcohol-related hospital admissions in England topped one million last year at an annual cost of £3.5 billion. Louise Rowlinson contributes an article headed "We are staggering blindly past the danger of excess alcohol".

Anne Perkins writes about the blame-game in the Department for Work and Pensions. She concludes: "One thing the rickety advance on reforming welfare makes abundantly clear – it's not working now".

14 November: A study of the piloting of the NHS111 helpline by NHS England finds that it failed to reduce the calls on emergency ambulances or to lessen the number of people arriving at A&E units. Whereas NHS Direct was largely staffed by trained nurses, NHS 111 relies on call handlers.

Jacky Davis, a consultant radiologist and author of *NHS SOS*, contributes an important article tucked away on page 38. She seizes on Sir David Nicholson's admission that privatisation and competition in the NHS have not proved a success. Rather, she argues, the new regime has led to "a quagmire in which improvements are blocked and only competition lawyers benefit". At the same time the National Audit Office has said that the small number of corporations who are winning tenders are becoming too big to fail. She points out that since the coalition came into power 20,000 nursing posts have been lost or left vacant, 8,000 beds cut, and A&E performance has reached an eight-year low. Yet she feels that the NHS can be saved. Urgent action is needed "to slow down the vandalism the service is suffering". Labour must commit to repeal the Health and Social Care Act, and reverse the market ideology. Importantly, the Secretary of State's responsibility to provide a comprehensive health service must be restored, along with action to redress the private finance initiative and the unremitting loss of beds.

15/16 November: As part of a reorganisation of GP contracts, Health Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, announces that from 2015 everybody over 75 will have a named doctor expected to become conversant with their medical history, ensuring better and faster medical support. Whether this will ease pressure on A&E units is disputed.

18 November: It is reported that executive pay is increasing 20 times faster than the wages of the average worker.

20 November: Conservative MP, Nick Boles, breaks ranks to say that the single biggest problem his party faces is being seen as the party of the rich. [Well, nothing but the truth].

The Centre for Social Justice reports that person debt in Britain has reached £1.4 trillion, an average of £54,000 per household. And that more than 5,000 people are being made homeless every year because of mortgage or rent debts.

The Office for National Statistics say that 47 per cent of recent graduates are working in jobs for which higher educational qualifications are not required.

21 November: Immigration minister, Mark Harper, is reported as declaring that open entry “will not cause mass Romanian migration to UK”. This may be worth remembering.

26 November: Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne, announces that a legal cap will be imposed on the overall cost of credit, including charges such as arrangement and penalty fees, as well as interest rates. This U-turn follows particular concern about so-called ‘payday loans’.

A report from the Office of the Children’s Commissioner, based on research led by Professor Jenny Pearce at the University of Bedfordshire, finds that the level of sexual violence in gang-affected neighbourhoods is comparable to that seen in war zones. On the same day, the third National Survey of Sexual Attitudes and Lifestyles reveals that one in 10 women in Britain admit to having been forced into having sex against their will. It also found that the proportion of women who say that they have been victims of sexual coercion is more than double that of those saying they have been raped.

Luciana Berger, shadow public health minister, describes as “deeply shocking” a reported rise in hospital admissions arising from hypothermia. Cases in 2012/13 were 25 per cent up on the year before, and 40 per cent on the year before that.

27 November: The Office for National Statistics estimates that ‘excess winter deaths’ in England and Wales, at 31,000, rose in 2012/13 by almost a third on the previous winter. People aged over 75 accounted for roughly 83 per cent of the total. Excess mortality was higher among females, while the north-west of England had the highest rates, and London the lowest.

Health Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, is to issue urgent abortion advice to doctors about the termination of pregnancy on grounds of gender, [following the controversial case mentioned in *Briefings* 62 and 63].

28 November: In the annual Margaret Thatcher lecture, Boris Johnson, Mayor of London, controversially asserted that “it is surely relevant to a conversation about equality that as many as 16% of our species have an IQ below 85, while about 2% have an IQ above 130”. He declared that inequality is essential to fostering “the spirit of envy” and spoke of greed as a “valuable spur to economic activity”.

A two-page report by Amelia Gentleman points out that “council estate residents are being impoverished by a policy aimed at making them move to smaller homes” and having to choose between food and heating.

A coalition of mental health charities says that “delays and lack of choice were having a devastating effect on people who were not getting the right treatment”. Some were driven to paying for private treatment. More than one in 10 are having to wait for more than a year for treatment, and more than half more than three months.

29 November: Equalities minister, Jo Swinson, announces a plan, to begin in April 2015, for new fathers to be able to share a year of parental leave following the birth of a child.

Despite David Cameron’s claim that net immigration would be reduced, ONS figures show that net migration to Britain has increased over the past year, rising by 15,000 to 182,000.

Health Secretary, Jeremy Hunt, reveals that less than half of people with dementia are being formally diagnosed, and therefore lack support. Across the nation there are substantial variations in diagnosis rates: as high as 75 per cent and as low as 33 per cent.

30 November: The badger cull in Gloucestershire has been abandoned. Marksmen failed to kill enough animals to meet even drastically reduced targets.

A telephone survey of Universal Credit claimants in northern pilot areas has found that 34 per cent resort to seeking money from other sources to make ends meet. No question was put as to how many people had secured new jobs under the scheme, intended to make work pay more than staying on benefits.

Liberty

In an e.mail received on 8 November, Liberty has commented on the appearance of Britain's three senior spy chiefs before a public parliamentary committee. It feels that their 'grilling' was over-friendly: questioning that wouldn't have scared a puppy. Only a small part of the session was dedicated to the Snowden revelations, and much of this allowed for a repetition of the claim that the disclosures had harmed national security, though no evidence of this was offered.

Liberty is taking legal action against the British Intelligence Services over their involvement in the scandal. And it is campaigning hard in Parliament and through the media for urgent amendment to the outdated laws governing surveillance, and for an end to blanket surveillance of the population. Liberty believes that politicians who claim 'if you have nothing to hide, you have nothing to fear' lack imagination and seriously underestimate public anger at being spied on

The Bulletin, the magazine of The British Polio Fellowship, November/December 2013, draws attention to a new website: <http://weconnectnow.wordpress.com>. Although US-based the site is said to have been used as a resource in 37 other countries, uniting people interested in rights and issues affecting people with disabilities, with particular emphasis on students accessing higher education and employment.

NB, the RNIB's magazine, November/December 2013, asks readers to spread the word about its social care campaign. It reveals that between 2005 and 2013 there has been a 43 per cent decline in the number of blind and partially sighted people in England getting even the most basic types of council support. The campaign has already been given a great deal of publicity, but NB still needs supporters to engage with local media and their MPs. RNIB is also calling for the Care Bill to include a provision requiring local authorities to make contact with adults who are newly certified as sight impaired, and provide them with appropriate rehabilitation even before a full community care needs assessment.

Able, the disability lifestyle magazine, November/December 2013, takes, as usual, a positive view of disability, focusing on activities and opportunities. There is a piece from the latest Minister for Disabled People, Mike Penning MP, declaring that it is his passion "to support people where I can so they can reach their aspirations", and to build on the work of Esther McVey, particularly by supporting and encouraging businesses to become more confident about hiring disabled people. This, of course, is a message we have heard before from an earlier government, and the editor, Tom Jamison, reminds readers that the transition from DLA to PIP and the associated assessment criteria regarding ability to simply get around has been controversial to say the least. He feels that the government "needs to be sure to make progress towards providing better infrastructure and opportunity for disabled people in the next year".

RoadPeace newsletter, autumn 2013, has news of two major achievements. Firstly, after 20 years campaigning, the introduction of a road collision verdict into inquests. RoadPeace believes that this should stop coroners from using 'accidental death', a verdict that has insulted and outraged tens of thousands of bereaved families over the past two decades, and should lead to greater recognition of the role of inquests in road deaths. Secondly, after 12 years, the promise of a joint inspectorate review of road death investigation and prosecution, due to start in 2014. Its report by the end of next summer will offer "great opportunity" for members to highlight their experiences and the scope for good practice.

Road casualty statistics for 2012 show an improvement on the previous year, not least 8 per cent fewer deaths, but RoadPeace reminds us that our daily death toll remains at five a day, and would be even higher if deaths occurring after 30 days were included in the road casualty statistics.

THE COST OF CARE

On the 25 November, HMRC reported on a two-year investigation into the care industry. It found that 48 per cent of the providers investigated had been paying their care workers below the national minimum wage. Shock, horror. But the plain fact is that these abysmal rates of pay are a direct consequence of cuts in council funding.

Another dramatic aspect of this unfairness is that as things stand any rise in the remuneration of care workers would bear heavily upon those who must pay for their care: starkly intensifying the anomaly that

whereas NHS provision is largely free at the point of delivery, many of those unfortunate enough to need extended social care are already being hit with prodigious long-term costs.

HELP TO BUY

Unsurprisingly, this government scheme is proving popular. But is there a danger that it will fuel rising house prices in the South East?

DO YOU WANT TO BE A VETERAN?

Every year we salute veterans of the armed forces as they process past the Cenotaph. But, please, as a victim only of compulsory national service, I don't want to be a veteran – or remembered for it.

HOSPITAL FAILINGS PERSIST

An annual report from the Care Quality Commission has found that in 2012/13, following the failures at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust, acute hospitals made no improvement in assessing and monitoring neither in the quality of care they provide, nor in safety and safeguarding, nor in treating patients with dignity and respect. Liz Kendall, shadow minister for care and older people, said the report showed the full scale of David Cameron's care crisis. The government, however, points to the remedial action it has already taken.

Guardian, 22 November 2013

WE HATE NO 72: SOCIAL NETWORKING

"The meaning doesn't matter if it's only idle chatter of a transcendental kind."

William Schwenck Gilbert: *Patience* (1881)

I must confess that this is somewhat personal. I have reclusive tendencies and am not into the electronic sharing of pleasantries with friends and relatives. This may be simply a social deficiency. Even when remote communication was limited to letter writing, I was averse to the chronicling of petty events. I do not see myself as anti-social, just reserved.

But, even allowing for such taciturn inhibitions, I think it is arguable that social networking has gone too far. Let me begin with the mobile phone, seemingly glued to the ears of its more enthusiastic adherents. Is there a genuine need for such loquacious communication, rendering the devotees insensible to common courtesies, oblivious to their fellows, and travelling by auto-pilot (most dangerous if doing so in a car)? How can there be so much to communicate; like poor, demented patients conversing with themselves? And what has become of privacy, as everyone passing by, like passive smokers, find themselves included in a torrent of verbosity and sometimes intimate personal information? Beginning with the opening 'hallo', when unconnected people, going about their daily business, think themselves being called.

Alternatively, if they are not talking, many of these chatterers will simply play with their i.pad, like an indispensable childish toy, equally dead to human interaction.

Then there are the tweeters. I will allow that Twitter is big business, having recently gone public with an estimated value of £30bn. Moreover, I accept there is undoubtedly a certain skill in devising a cogent message within the constraint of 140 characters. But, you may say, is not my e.mail itself a 'briefing'? I make the distinction that I wish simply to draw attention to issues more widely discussed elsewhere, whereas the tweet, it seems to me, is more a kind of shorthand, intended to express a powerful message succinctly and ingeniously. The danger is that it has much in common with blurting-out, an effusion not fully thought through or adequately expressed, which can land one in a heap of trouble. Such messages, moreover, lose force by virtue of their profusion. Nigel Willmott, the letters editor at *The Guardian*, has had to come to terms with the power of Twitter to reinforce debate, while at the same time seeing tweeting as "involving a self-indulgence bordering on narcissism among some of its most active users". He writes (25 November) that the idea of a debate on Twitter seems risible: "more redolent of two street mobs yelling slogans at each other. And the slightly stomach-churning tweets welcoming some new well-known name to Twitter" as having "the whiff of an exclusive freemasonry".

I feel much the same way about Facebook, and the more up-market Linked In, so difficult from which to escape. Are these not simply forms of self-aggrandisement writ large and effusively? Their popularity is undoubted. According to *The Wall Street Journal*, Facebook had over one billion users in September 2012,

including, said USA Today, about 83 million fake accounts. Such colossal membership indicates a widespread aspiration to self-publish personal profiles and to network with others. As such, of course, it is open not only to hacking and fraud, but more commonly to a tendency to flaunt one's accomplishments and connections. In the sense intended by Paul's first letter to the Corinthians (13:4) these 'selfies' are frequently "puffed-up": a veritable gasconade of vaunted self-indulgence.

But these are relatively trivial objections. There is a much darker side to social networking. Evidence is mounting that many young people are spending their lives in a virtual world, slaves to an addictive cacothese and open to exploitation. Social media has been reported as a "key factor in rising childhood depression", with in particular young girls weighed down with anxiety about how many Facebook friends they have. The Economist went so far as to assert that, according to new research, using the site makes people feel less happy and satisfied with their lives, regardless of how many friends they have. The internet generally is also a fertile field for sexual predators. In October, a survey on internet use found that one in five children claimed to have met somebody they had previously known only online. A significant number of them were on computers in the early hours without parental supervision. The dangers are very real. In the same month two men – one with HIV – admitted dozens of sex crimes against large numbers of young teenage boys, having groomed them on social media sites. A report from the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre revealed the growth of children as young as eight being blackmailed into performing sexual acts on webcams, and the police revealed that in the UK 184 children had been victims of online sexual blackmail.

Mobile phones present a similar peril. It is well recognised that they are used by paedophiles to target and groom their victims.

In last month's *Briefing*, John Beasley wrote about his life without alcohol. His message has recently been reinforced by the achievements of teetotal jockey Tony McCoy. I suggest, however, that, at least for vulnerable young people, addiction to social networking can be an even more insidious menace.

Derek Kinrade