
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE

3 December 2015

Dear Sir,

STATEMENT MADE REGARDING BRITISH MEDICAL JOURNAL (BMJ) ARTICLE ON MORTALITY IN HOSPITALS ON WEEKENDS.

Thank you for your correspondence of 15 October about statements made by the Secretary of State for Health, in which he refers to an article published in the British Medical Journal (BMJ) on mortality in hospitals on weekends¹. In particular, you asked whether Mr Hunt's statement in the House of Commons on 13 October that 'According to an independent study conducted by the BMJ, there are 11,000 excess deaths because we do not staff our hospitals properly at weekends' breached the Code of Practice for Official Statistics.

The BMJ article referred to by the Secretary of State is not an official statistics publication and so is not subject to the provisions of the Code of Practice for Official Statistics. Therefore there has not been a breach of the Code.

Nevertheless, as a matter of principle, the Authority encourages compliance with the high standards of the Code of Practice in all public uses of data and information, regardless of whether the source is an official statistic or not. We have considered the Secretary of State's statement in this context.

We note that the BMJ article concludes that there is not a definite causal link between the weekend mortality rates it highlights, and the nature of service provision at the weekend: "it is not possible to ascertain the extent to which these deaths may be preventable; to assume they are avoidable would be rash and misleading".

However, the article does raise questions about the nature of weekend service provision as its title suggests 'Increased mortality associated with weekend hospital admission: a case for expanded seven day services?'. Whilst the article does not itself demonstrate causality, it seems reasonable to conclude that the article argues for a careful consideration of weekend service provision. We note that in other statements, the Secretary of State (for example, in an article in the Daily Telegraph on 1 November²) has referred to the BMJ article in a manner that does not imply causality.

We are speaking with Department of Health officials to ask that future references to this article are clear about the difference between implying a causality that the article does not

¹Freemantle, N et al, 2015, Increased mortality associated with weekend hospital admission: a case for expanded seven day services?, BMJ 2015;351:h4596.

²<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/11968014/Jeremy-Hunt-Junior-doctors-have-been-misled-by-the-BMA.html>

demonstrate, and describing the conclusions reached by the authors. As more research is undertaken and published on the nature and extent of any 'weekend effect', it would of course be appropriate to draw on that research too.

In your letter you also asked for my opinion on the Secretary of State's statement to the House in relation to the Code of Conduct for MPs and the Ministerial Code of Conduct. This is a matter for the Permanent Secretary of the Department of Health, Una O'Brien.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Andrew Dilnot". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Sir Andrew Dilnot CBE