
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Rt. Hon. Andrew Lansley CBE MP
Secretary of State for Health
Department of Health
Richmond House
79 Whitehall
LONDON
SW1A 2NS

23 March 2011

Dear Secretary of State

WITHDRAWAL OF FUNDING FOR HEALTH STATISTICS

I understand that the NHS Information Centre has decided that its contribution to the costs of the General Lifestyle Survey, conducted by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on behalf of several government departments, will cease with immediate effect, subject to approval by the Department of Health. I am told that the amount at issue is some £300,000 annually.

The ONS, who, following extensive consultation with the users of their statistics, have just completed their post-budget cuts business plan, have no funds available to make up this shortfall, without damaging their own vital economic and social statistics. The decision by the NHS Information Centre will, therefore, result in the immediate discontinuation of long-established National Statistics on smoking, drinking, health conditions and use of health services.

I am told that no user consultation has taken place: if so, the decision to cease the funding is in breach of the *Code of Practice for Official Statistics* (protocol 1.7) and thus in breach of the statutory requirement on government departments (section 13 of the *Statistics and Registration Service Act 2007*) to continue to comply with the Code.

The Statistics Authority is concerned that the abrupt discontinuation of a time series on topics as central to public policy as smoking prevalence and alcohol consumption will seriously undermine the UK's ability to monitor key trends affecting public health.

I understand that there may be alternative sources for some of the information collected but that these are likely to be inferior to those currently in use. A highly desirable prior option would be for ONS or the Department of Health to consult users of the statistics about whether and how alternative sources could be developed to meet their needs.

Decisions about the Department of Health's statistical budgets are, of course, for you and not for the Statistics Authority to take. The Statistics Authority does not seek to retain statistics which are not, in today's budgetary climate, affordable, or which could be replaced from other sources. But it is our duty under the Statistics Act to point out non-compliance with the Code

of Practice's requirements for consultation with the users of statistics; and to draw your attention to the powerful arguments for retaining these statistics.

I urge you to reject the Information Centre's proposal.

I am copying this letter to Jil Matheson, the National Statistician and to Tim Straughan, Chief Executive of the NHS Information Centre.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Michael Scholar". The script is cursive and fluid.

Sir Michael Scholar KCB