
Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, Sir Michael Scholar KCB

Tom Watson MP
House of Commons
LONDON
SW1A 0AA

17 May 2011

Dear Mr Watson

EXPERIMENTAL STATISTICS ON NHS WORKFORCE

Thank you for your letter of 12 April about the use of provisional, Experimental Statistics on the NHS workforce by a Department of Health spokesperson. I am sorry not to have replied before now, but I needed to check this carefully with officials.

As you note, Experimental Statistics are defined in Code of Practice for Official Statistics as new official statistics undergoing evaluation. Their 'experimental' status is intended partly to be an indication that they may not be as robust as more fully developed statistics. And as you imply in your letter, provisional experimental statistics need to be treated with some caution. However, there is no objection to using them in public statements or debate as long as the specific use is itself appropriate.

As far as we can establish, their use in the particular context to which you refer was reasonable. As with any provisional statistics, it remains possible that the estimate may be revised, and in that instance we would expect attention to be drawn to that – the more so where the provisional statistics have been used in a departmental statement.

The development of these workforce statistics was the subject of consultation in early 2010. The statistics (the NHS Hospital and Community Health Service workforce statistics) are produced by the NHS Information Centre and are the main series providing information about the NHS workforce. The Information Centre has published information about the methods and quality of the statistics. This includes the observation that revisions to these statistics six months after first publication are small.

I have asked for the Statistics Authority to be informed of any significant revision to the estimated increase in number of nurses, as quoted on Radio 4. In that event, we will let you know and pursue the matter further.

I am copying this letter to Sir Gus O'Donnell, to the National Statistician, Jil Matheson, and to the statistical Heads of Profession at both the Department for Health and the NHS Information Centre.

Yours sincerely



Sir Michael Scholar KCB