

Warning letter not seen by relevant body, Bristol inquiry told

Clare Dyer, *legal correspondent, BMJ*

A letter sent in July 1992 to the Royal College of Surgeons of England raising serious concerns about death rates for babies undergoing heart surgery in Bristol was not passed on to the NHS body responsible for deciding whether hospitals should keep their designation as specialist units, the public inquiry into the deaths of children who had had heart surgery at Bristol Royal Infirmary heard last week.

The letter from Dr John Zorab, medical director of the Frenchay Hospital in Bristol, was sent to Sir Terence English, who had just finished his term as president of the royal college.

Sir Terence was a member of the supraregional services advisory group, which designated hospitals as centres for specialist services. The group was due to

hold a meeting to consider the status of 10 hospitals, including the Bristol Royal Infirmary, as specialist centres.

Sir Michael Carlisle, chairman of the advisory group from 1989 to 1994, told the inquiry that he was "appalled" to learn of the letter mentioning the "delicate and serious problem" of poor outcomes in children's heart surgery amid the "great anxieties" of doctors at Bristol Royal Infirmary. Had he known about the letter he would have launched an immediate investigation.

Richard Lissack QC, counsel for the parents whose children died or were left brain damaged after heart surgery at Bristol, said that his clients strongly suspected before the inquiry opened that there had been a cover up involving the Royal

College of Surgeons, the Department of Health, and the hospital. That remained their view.

It was their understanding that "by July 1992, at the very latest, all three of those bodies knew at the highest level that babies were dying at unprecedented number in Bristol, yet nothing was done about it—nothing for three years by which time at least 44 others had died."

Earlier, Sir Michael said that members of the advisory group had been told that Sir Terence had "reservations" about allowing Bristol, which had been designated in 1984, to carry on as a specialist centre. Sir Michael said that he had heard only that Bristol had a low throughput of patients, and he thought this must explain the reservations.

Sir Terence said that after receiving Dr Zorab's letter, he had revisited the report of a review of infant and neonatal cardiac services which the advisory group had asked the royal college to carry out. He was concerned that throughput was falling and mortality was high at

Bristol and he had discussed this with Professor David Hamilton, chairman of the review group, who agreed that Bristol should be de-designated.

Sir Terence said that he could not attend the advisory group meeting because he was going on holiday, but he had informed the group's medical secretary, Dr Norman Halliday, and asked him to tell the meeting. But Professor Hamilton had later discussed the matter with other colleagues from the royal college and decided to reverse the recommendation.

Sir Terence confirmed that he had not passed on his concerns about Bristol to the Department of Health or the regional health authority. He had assumed that Dr Halliday would take the matter further.

The inquiry into the care of children undergoing complex heart operations at the Bristol Royal Infirmary between 1983 and 1995 follows General Medical Council proceedings which found two surgeons and the former chief executive guilty of serious professional misconduct. □

Savage challenges Irvine for GMC presidency

Clare Dyer, *legal correspondent, BMJ*

Sir Donald Irvine, president of the General Medical Council, is facing an attempt to unseat him, in part over his role in the Bristol heart surgery saga. The high profile obstetrician and gynaecologist Wendy Savage is to stand against Sir Donald for the presidency of the body which regulates British doctors, in an unprecedented challenge to an incumbent president.

Mrs Savage, a senior lecturer at St Bartholomew's and the Royal London School of Medicine and Dentistry, Queen Mary and Westfield College, accuses Sir Donald of "a major political error" in embarking on a misconduct case against the Bristol doctors, causing "untold damage" to the parents of children operated on at Bristol, and to the medical profession.

The consultant obstetrician, who fought and won a celebrat-



Wendy Savage is challenging Sir Donald Irvine for GMC presidency

ed battle to keep her job when her employers brought allegations of incompetence against her, was nominated by Richard Colman, a holistic GP in York, and by Essex GP John Cormack.

In a statement, she said she was standing because of "concerns about the manner and direction in which Sir Donald is leading us."

She added: "As an elected member I believe it is my duty openly to express the disquiet that other doctors have voiced privately. Improving standards is

laudable, but the way we do this has to be based on good evidence and be feasible.

"Many doctors are critical of the way the president acted following the Bristol case and the haste with which 'revalidation' was pushed through without adequate consultation."

Mrs Savage went on: "One has to ask, why did the GMC become involved in judging the Bristol case? This was about surgical performance, yet the performance procedures had not come into operation. Why did

the GMC not insist that an enquiry was carried out by the Department of Health?"

In his statement, Sir Donald, a former GP, said that when he took over as president in 1995 the GMC was seen by some as "bureaucratic and reactive—and a closed shop." He built on initiatives already under way on medical education and professional standards, and his aim had been to develop the GMC as a model of excellence.

"The unpredictable, high profile cases at Bristol and elsewhere, reflecting events in the early 1990s, have shaken public and government confidence in the profession, and caused dismay among those who care about the profession's self respect. The GMC has been thrust into the public gaze."

Against that background, the council had been "rigorously proactive" and now needed to build on its considerable achievements, he said. On revalidation, he intended to proceed "with the utmost sensitivity, thoroughness and care, consulting widely and regularly, so that all interests are taken into account."

The election is scheduled to take place on 25 May. □