Complaining in the NHS, 1960s-1980s

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Context

• Complaining about medical treatment or mistreatment highly contentious area

• Complaint more common today than in recent past:

2011-12: 107,259 written patient complaints (hospitals)

1971: 9,614 written patient complaints (hospitals)

• 1960s/70s increased attention on complaints

• 2 strands:

   Scandals & enquires

   Complaining and consumption/representation

   • But – systems & attitudes made complaining difficult

Systems

• Widespread local variation in hospital complaints systems

• No system for handling complaints made by staff

• Davies Committee (1971-3) and the ‘right’ to complain

• Long delay

• Serendipitous origins of Hospital Complaints Procedure Act, 1985

Attitudes

• Negative attitude of medical profession towards complaining

• Patient-consumer groups took more positive view: right to complain and complaint as ‘early warning system’

• ‘Gratitude barrier’
• Fear of reprisals from staff

Summary

• Complaints procedures slow to be introduced, and weak even once in place

• Substantial barriers to complaints, especially for vulnerable patients

• Situation somewhat better by 1980s than it had been in 1960s

• But complaints continue to be a difficult and contentious issue