

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



Hospital Complaints Procedure Act 1985

A form titled "COMPLAINT" with fields for "TO:", "WHOSE FAULT:", "DESIRED OUTCOME:", and "COMPLAINANT:". It includes checkboxes for "MINE", "YOURS", "OURS", "OTHER:", "APOLOGY", "EXPLANATION", "LITIGATION", "PROMOTION", "RESTITUTION", "CHANGE", and "ANONYMOUS". It also has a date field with sub-fields for HOUR, MINUTE, SECOND, MONTH, DAY, and YEAR.

TO:		HOUR	MINUTE	SECOND
WHOSE FAULT:		<input type="checkbox"/> MINE	<input type="checkbox"/> OURS	
		<input type="checkbox"/> YOURS	<input type="checkbox"/> OTHER:	
DESIRED OUTCOME:		<input type="checkbox"/> APOLOGY	<input type="checkbox"/> LITIGATION	<input type="checkbox"/> RESTITUTION
		<input type="checkbox"/> EXPLANATION	<input type="checkbox"/> PROMOTION	<input type="checkbox"/> CHANGE
COMPLAINANT:		<input type="checkbox"/> ANONYMOUS		



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



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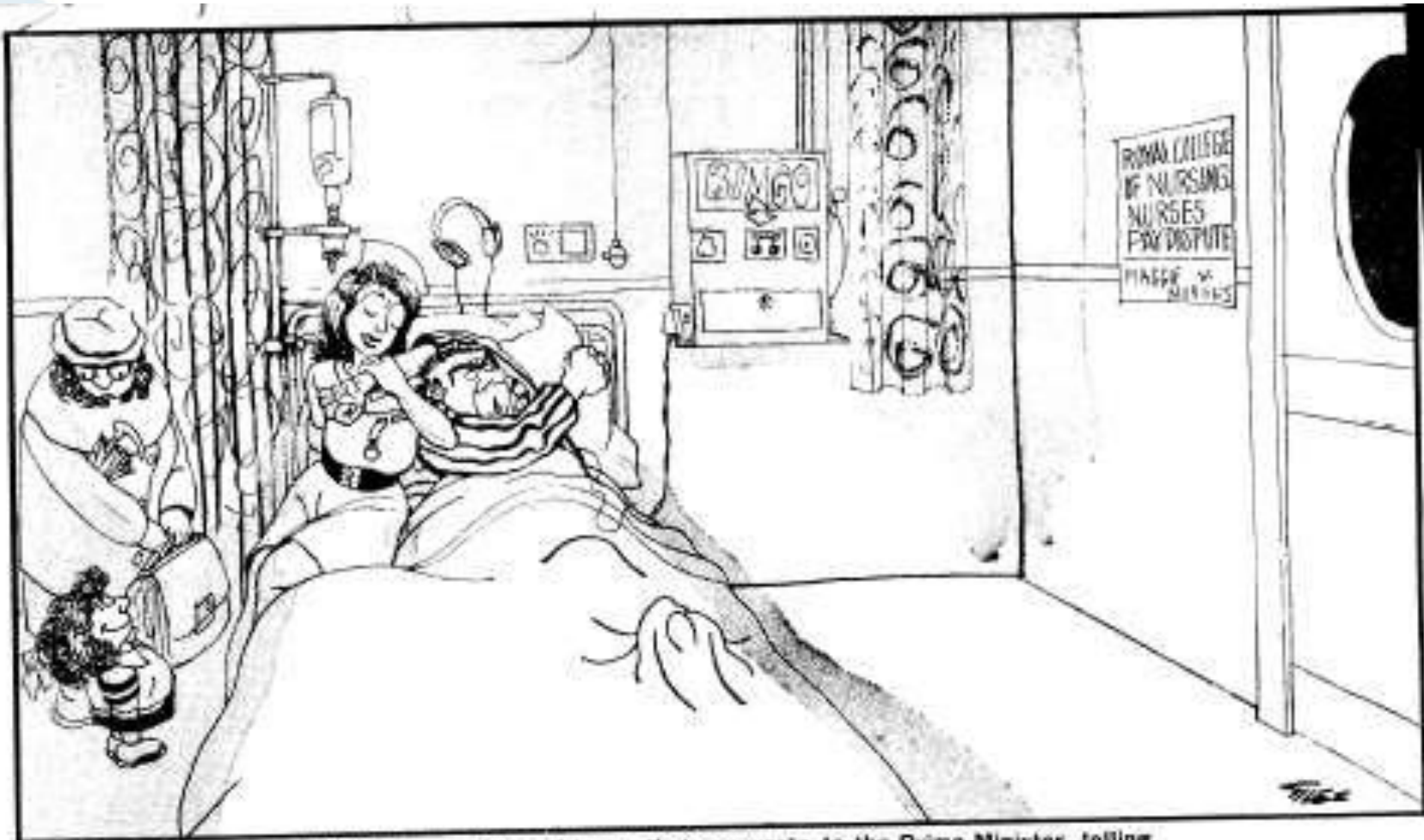
"You the one who complained to Matron about us making a noise?"

Sunday Express, August 20th, 1961

Sunday Express, 20 August 1961

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"A little bird whispered to me that you wrote to the Prime Minister, telling her we always keep you waiting and she ought to cut our salaries by half"

Daily Express, 25 April 1985

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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

