

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