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Date: 26th October 2010
Our ref: HVT/1145/fgb
Page: 1 of 2

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ASSEMBLY GOVERNMENT RESPONSE ON *HOME OXYGEN THERAPY SERVICES*

The Deputy Clerk sought my advice on 1 October on the letter from Paul Williams, the Assembly Government's Director General for Health and Social Services, following his appearance before the Committee at its meeting on 24 June about home oxygen services and, in particular, the use of specialist clinical assessments.

Since February 2010, when the Minister for Health and Social Services wrote to the Committee in response to recommendation 2 of the Committee's February 2009 report, the Committee has pressed for details on the scope to make financial savings through the increased use of clinical assessments. Specifically the Committee was concerned that such assessments may not yet be well established throughout Wales, and that there may be further scope to deliver better value for money from the home oxygen contract that was introduced from February 2006. Such specialist assessments can help to avoid unnecessary costs by preventing the provision of oxygen to patients who do not need it and, of course, are very important for the delivery of a safe and quality service to patients.

At the PAC meeting on 24 June, Mr Williams acknowledged that implementation of the clinical assessments had been more difficult than anticipated and that some health boards had not addressed compliance with the British Thoracic Society guidelines. He noted that a further £1.6 million has been allocated to Health Boards in the current year to improve the clinical assessment process. He undertook to write further to the Committee after his officials had analysed the action plans provided by each of the health boards.

In his subsequent letter, Mr Williams states that the action plans provided by health boards point to a recognition and commitment by health boards to the prioritisation, development and delivery of an equitable clinical assessment service. He outlines a number of welcome improvements such as the development of a patient information leaflet; an annual survey of patient and carer users; better scrutiny of payment invoices; and improving governance by integrating the assessment service across Health Board localities. Mr Williams concludes that he is satisfied that health boards have action plans in place which will continue to improve the delivery of an effective and efficient clinical assessment service, which will deliver savings.

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Date: 26th October 2010
Our ref: HVT/1145/fgb – Mr Jonathan Morgan AM
Page: 2 of 2

However, his letter does not provide any information on how consistent arrangements and good practice are across health boards; whether they are consistent between the different areas within the merged health boards; or what the trend is in the cost of service provision across Wales.

Mr Williams undertakes to provide further information at the end of this year on the savings achieved in 2009-10 on the home oxygen contract, as well as how the additional £1.6 million funding provided for clinical assessments is driving those savings.

These comments do provide some assurance to the Committee that the Assembly Government is continuing to monitor the progress made by NHS bodies in establishing specialist clinical assessments and in reducing costs. However, the response does not provide reassurance that such assessments are now well established across Wales and that there is a fully equitable service to patients. The further information promised by Mr Williams, on the savings achieved and the impact of the additional £1.6 million funding, would provide the Committee with a further opportunity to assess the progress made by the NHS in improving home oxygen services and in reducing the cost of the home oxygen contract.

The Committee might be interested to note that the current five-year home oxygen contract is due to expire at the end of January 2011. We understand that the contract is to be extended until June 2012, to provide time to negotiate a local call-off contract. Although the Department of Health is leading those negotiations, we are told that each of the ten regions (of which, Wales is one) has significant input into the process. It would be timely, if the Committee so wished, to probe the extent to which the lessons learnt on the current contract are being taken into account in the negotiations of a new contract.



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AUDITOR GENERAL FOR WALES