

coalition government

Like many other media, our April news review did not consider the possibility of a Conservative - Liberal Democrat coalition when looking at health policy. Here we present a short guide to what the new government is planning.

The general election held on May 6 produced a 'hung' Parliament in which no party commanded an overall majority. Contrary to much media comment, this was not in fact unprecedented, with a similar situation having occurred in 1974, and with both Labour (in the late 1970s) and the Conservatives (in the mid 1990s) having governed without an overall majority before.

After a number of days of uncertainty, the Conservatives (who were by far the largest party following the election, with 307 of the 650 available seats) announced a coalition with the Liberal Democrats (who had in fact lost seats, winning 57).

The Coalition: Our Programme for Government set out the new administration's plans. A major point is a commitment to maintain health spending increases in real terms in each year of the new Parliament. This has drawn considerable controversy when other departments are facing significant cuts. There are plans (some already being implemented) to reduce 'top-down' targets and management. More controversially, there was a plan to allow patients to register with any GP, regardless of their address, which has already been opposed by the BMA at a subsequent Annual Representative Meeting.

Other policies include work on urgent care, the creation of an independent NHS board, and establishment of a 'Cancer Drugs Fund'. Outside

the 'NHS' section of the coalition programme, policies such as limiting the application of the European Working Time Directive in the UK and banning the sale of alcohol below cost price may also have implications for healthcare.

The last page of the document is worthy of special note, stating that 'the deficit reduction programme takes precedence over any of the other measures in this agreement', and meaning that even with such a document, it is hard to predict exactly what might happen.
(programmeforgovernment.hmg.gov.uk)

christians and the election

The Westminster 2010 Declaration of Christian Conscience sought pledges from would-be MPs to 'respect, uphold and protect the right of Christians to hold and express Christian beliefs and act according to Christian conscience'. Organisations such as *Christian Institute* produced guides to suggest a Christian perspective on election issues. The *Westminster 2010* team's analysis of past voting records and pledges signed suggested that the election had resulted in a higher number of MPs who would be 'supportive of Christian conscience'.

63 MPs whose voting records had not usually been supportive on conscience issues lost their seats (perhaps the most famous being Liberal Democrat Evan Harris). Eleven members of the Conservative Christian Fellowship were elected, along with at least one member of the Christian Socialist Movement. However specifically Christian parties won few votes, with George Hargreaves' *Christian Party* getting just over 18,000 votes nationally.
(westminster2010.org.uk, ccfwebsite.com, christian.org.uk)

new NICE guidance

Draft guidance from NICE has suggested that 'emergency contraception' should now be provided in advance. The news came the day before figures published showed that more than 1,000 children aged 14 and under had undergone abortions during 2009.

The Chief Executive of Birmingham Brook Advisory Centre said: 'We know emergency contraception is more effective the sooner you use it after sex so it's crucial young women have it on hand in case they need it'.

However Norman Wells of the Family Education Trust commented: 'The draft guidance is clearly more interested in getting young people to use contraception than it is in discouraging them from engaging in sexual activity in the first place. The easy availability of the morning-after pill is part of a mix that is lulling young people in particular into a false sense of security and encouraging a more casual attitude to sex.'

In separate document, NICE has called for consideration of minimum pricing per unit of alcohol, and reducing personal allowances for the import of alcohol. It also suggested consideration of a total ban on alcohol advertising.

The Wine and Spirit Trade Association commented: 'this guidance proposes measures that will not address the root causes of alcohol misuse and will merely punish the majority of British consumers who drink responsibly. Minimum pricing is probably illegal and won't stop problem drinkers.' The BMA supported a minimum unit price for alcohol in 2009. (telegraph.co.uk (25 May, 26 May) nice.org.uk, wsta.co.uk, bma.org.uk)

artificial life

American scientists claim to have developed the first living cell governed entirely by synthetic DNA. Dr Craig Ventner said 'we've now been able to take our synthetic chromosome and transplant it into a recipient cell - a different organism. I think they [the organisms] are going to potentially create a new industrial revolution.' Dr Helen Wallace of Genewatch UK said: 'If you release new organisms into the environment, you can do more harm than good. He isn't God, he's actually being very human; trying to get money invested in his technology and avoid regulation that would restrict its use.'

Professor Julian Savulescu of Oxford said the potential of the science was real and significant, but in the far future. He also warned that 'the risks are unparalleled. We need new standards of safety evaluation for this kind of radical research and protections from military or terrorist misuse or abuse.' (news.bbc.co.uk, 20 May)

cmf facebook page

www.facebook.com/ukcmf is the address for CMF's new facebook 'fan page'. With over 440 followers, it enables quick and easy communication. If you are a facebook user and haven't 'liked' the page already, why not do so, and encourage your friends to do so. We're updating the page with news of upcoming events and campaigns, along with a central link to many CMF groups already on facebook. Why not check if your medical school has a group, and resurrect it if it is out-of-date?

erratum

On checking the last edition, we realised that we'd missed the names of those who kindly contributed to the news review. Our sincere apologies to Charles Williams, Will Nevard, Sam Botchey, Emma Henderson and Siôn Glaze.