

From the Rt Hon Andy Burnham MP
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The Rt Hon Tessa Jowell MP
House of Commons
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Dear Tessa,

Thank you for your letter of 3 March enclosing an example of correspondence you have received from a number of your constituents about Breakthrough Breast Cancer's Every Chance campaign.

As you know, it is for clinicians, using their expert judgement and taking into account the individual circumstances of each patient, to ensure that all patients with breast cancer receive the most appropriate treatment, regardless of their age.

To help reduce variations in treatment quality, the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE) updated its *Improving outcomes in breast cancer* guidance in 2002. This guidance makes recommendations on the treatment, management and care of women with breast cancer. In February 2009, NICE published clinical guidelines on breast cancer (advanced and early and locally advanced), which cover the treatment that patients with breast cancer should be offered.

We are aware of evidence that some older people receive less intensive treatment than younger people even when they are fit enough to receive it. We want to ensure that older people benefit from the best possible cancer services.

As part of our programme to improve cancer services and outcomes, we have established the National Cancer Equality Initiative (NCEI). Through this initiative, we are looking at tackling inequalities in cancer care that may be experienced by different groups within society, including older people. A practical guide to reducing cancer inequalities will be published by the NCEI shortly.

The Government encourages all women to be breast aware. The Department of Health's *Be Breast Aware* leaflet, produced with Cancer Research UK, sets out the signs and symptoms of breast cancer. This encourages women to know what changes to look for and to report any changes to their GP as quickly as possible to

give the best opportunity to successfully treat the cancer. It is available from local screening centres and most GP surgeries and is printed in a number of languages.

GPs have an essential role in the diagnosis of cancer. Typically, a GP will see one new case of breast cancer each year. Whilst many cancers are detected through the NHS Breast Screening Programme, many patients first present their symptoms to their GP.

In June 2005, to help GPs make decisions about when to refer people to specialists when they present with symptoms that could be caused by cancer, NICE published updated referral guidelines for suspected cancer. These can be viewed on NICE's website at www.nice.org.uk by typing 'referral guidelines for suspected cancer' in the search facility.

The *Cancer Reform Strategy* announced the establishment of the National Awareness and Early Diagnosis Initiative, which is being co-chaired by the National Cancer Director, Professor Mike Richards, and the Chief Executive of Cancer Research UK, Mr Harpal Kumar. The initiative was formally launched in November 2008 and its aim is to improve cancer symptom awareness amongst healthcare professionals and members of the public, and to encourage people with symptoms to seek medical help earlier than they do now. It is bringing together and collaborating with representatives of local authorities, the Department of Health, the National Cancer Research Institute, cancer charities and patient representatives. The work of this initiative includes looking at interventions and diagnostics in primary care.

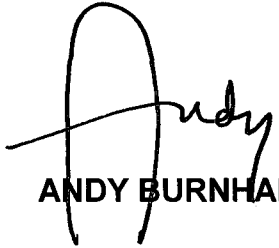
The National Patient Safety Agency has identified missed diagnosis as an important issue. To understand more about the nature and extent of delays in cancer diagnosis, the Department of Health is funding the Royal College of General Practitioners to carry out an audit of cancer diagnosis in primary care. This audit will:

- provide a baseline understanding of which patient groups are experiencing the greatest delays in primary care;
- provide insights into the primary care diagnostic process; and
- help construct an audit tool which can be used nationally to generate large scale data.

Findings from the national audit will be used to make decisions about how best to provide more support to GPs, and other primary care professionals, to ensure early diagnosis of cancer. In addition, the Royal College of General Practitioners will consider how findings from the audit could inform the education and training of GPs.

I hope that this reply assures your constituents that the Government is committed to ensuring early diagnosis of breast cancer and the highest quality of treatment possible for all cancer patients.

Best wishes,



ANDY BURNHAM