



NHS Management Executive
St. Andrew's House
Edinburgh EH1 3DG

19 March 1997

Dear Colleague

GENERAL ELECTION GUIDANCE

Summary

1. This letter provides guidance on the conduct of business during the General Election campaign. In particular, it provides guidance on dealing with the media and Parliamentary candidates.

Action

2. Health Board General Managers and Trust Chief Executives should issue prompt guidance to Chairmen, non-executive appointees and staff - taking account of the guidance contained in this letter - to enable them to respond to enquiries from the media or Parliamentary candidates. Action should also be taken, as required, on the other matters covered in this letter.

3. This letter replaces the guidance issued in Circular DGM(1992)18 regarding General Elections.

Yours sincerely

GEOFF SCAIFE
Chief Executive
Scottish Health Service

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REFERENCE ONLY**

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1. Now that a General Election has been announced, Health Boards, NHS Trusts and other Scottish Health Service bodies may be faced with requests for information and views from media representatives, Parliamentary candidates, and from representatives of political organisations, about the activities of the NHS. They must seek to prevent any grounds for complaint that they are behaving partially towards any of the candidates and parties represented in the election.

Media Enquiries

2. Media enquiries about the operation of health services should be answered only to the extent of providing factual explanation of current Health Board and Trust policy, statements and decisions by reference to published material. Particular care must be taken not to become involved in a partisan way in election issues.

3. It is important that Health Boards and Trusts establish clear procedures locally so that a consistent approach is taken on questions from media representatives. Those answering media enquiries should limit their comments to their own areas of responsibility. Enquiries about national policy should be referred to the Scottish Office Information Directorate (0131 244 2656) and questions relating to health proposals of political parties should be referred to the Parliamentary candidate or party office.

4. There is no objection to issuing routine news releases, figures which are issued on a monthly or regular basis, or drawing attention to and as necessary summarising reports of specific committees or bodies which a Health Board or Trust is required to publish. These releases should be prepared in non-controversial language, and should avoid recapitulation of past Government achievements.

Dealing with enquiries from political parties and Parliamentary candidates

5. Parliamentary candidates will get policy briefing from their own party headquarters, but may also contact Health Boards and Trusts. Factual information may be made available unless it has been supplied to management in confidence. Health Boards and Trusts can therefore provide organisations or members of the public with factual information which does not require disproportionate time or effort to produce.

6. All candidates should have access to the same information but it is not necessary to circulate information every time a query is answered. The routine issuing of news releases sent to Members of Parliament should cease on their becoming Parliamentary candidates; that is, once Parliament has risen for the election campaign.

Campaigning and canvassing on Scottish Health Service premises

7. Health Boards and Trusts should consider carefully whether to allow:

7.1 visits by Parliamentary candidates;

7.2 personal canvassing; and

7.3 filming or photography by political parties on NHS premises.

8. If they agree to such a request from one candidate, they must be prepared to offer comparable facilities to all others. The overriding concern must be to avoid disruption to patients' treatment. Political meetings should not be held on NHS premises.

9. Political posters should not be displayed on NHS premises. Other posters and advertising material purporting to be apolitical and published by other groups should be carefully scrutinised to ensure that it cannot be regarded as favouring a particular candidate or party.

Continuing conduct of Scottish Health Service business

Use of the media

10. The normal business of the Scottish Health Service requires many public contacts and much of this can proceed in the normal way. For example, existing localised health promotion campaigns may not need to be interrupted, but it would be best to avoid launching any new initiatives or documents, or maildrops or display advertising (apart from semi-display recruitment press advertising which can continue provided it appears only on classified pages and limited in style to quarter page or equivalent), in the period up to the Election as the messages are likely to be lost in the welter of Election publicity. In addition, some might be open to misrepresentation. Similarly, printed material should not normally be given any fresh distribution during the Election period in order to avoid any competition with the flow of Election material. If in doubt, it is best to err on the side of caution.

Advertising

11. The deployment of posters and other high-profile publicity should not be launched in the Election period lest it divert attention from the election campaign. The normal display of posters on NHS premises may continue, provided this cannot be construed as going beyond existing national and local health policies.

Candidacy of Scottish Health Service employees

12. Time off during working hours is governed by the provisions of Section 29 of the Employment Protection (Consolidation) Act 1978 and as required by other legislation. A full-time employee who is elected would be expected to resign. (See the Employment Protection (Consolidation) Act 1978 and sections 3 and 52 of the General Whitley Council Handbook.)

Other Scottish Health Service employees

13. Scottish Health Service employees are free to engage in public debate or comment during the Election period. However they should not use their official premises or equipment and should not make comments based on information not generally available to the public. It must be clearly stated that the views expressed are those of the individual and not of any Health Board, NHS Trust, or other Scottish Health Service body.

Chairmen and other non-executive appointees

14. Chairmen and non-executives appointed by Scottish Office Ministers are reminded of the terms of their appointment concerning political activity.

Health and Trust Board meetings

15. Health and Trust Board meetings should continue in the normal way. It would be prudent, however, not to introduce new items which are likely to be the subject of controversy on the agenda at meetings.

Financial Commitments

16. During the General Election, Health Boards and Trusts may proceed within the terms of any legally binding commitments. However no further decisions should be made, or actions taken, which are of a continuously binding or long-term character. If, exceptionally, a Health Board or Trust believe it is essential to make such a decision or take such action during the General Election, they must seek the Management Executive's advice before doing so.

Non-political lectures

17. Such lectures need not be cancelled or postponed, but should be based on published facts. Health Board and NHS Trust members and managers should avoid public debate about controversial issues.

Correspondence

18. Letters from former MPs to Boards should be processed as usual; replies may be made public, or the subject of political debate, so they should be as simple as possible to avoid misinterpretation. Letters from the public should be answered in the normal way.