

Briefing Note on Government Policy and Cancer Screening

Last year Liberal Democrat MP Dr Vincent Cable secured a parliamentary debate on the issue of government policy in relation to cancer screening. The full transcript is available in Hansard (13 Jun 2003: Column 999). Although decisions on screening provisions rely, rightly, on medical and scientific advice, funding priorities also reflect political pressure: hence the debate.

Britain has a longstanding and successful programme of breast cancer screening. Partly as a result, deaths from the disease have fallen 20% over the last decade. Survival rates for women who have been screened are significantly higher than for non-screened cases. The Government has now agreed to extend the age for screening to 70, which other campaigners and Dr Cable had fought for. In the debate Dr Cable pressed for the age at which screening starts to be reduced to 40; this is in the light of compelling medical research, published in the Lancet, which showed that many lives could be saved. A large pilot study will be finished next year.

Cervical cancer screening through the smear test has saved many lives: an estimated 1000 a year. But there are significant numbers of women with the disease – as many as 1 in 5 – whom the test fails to detect. Improved technology has been available for some years and, despite pressure, including in Parliament, introduction has been slow. The new test (liquid based cytology) is now being incorporated into the ‘smear test’ as medical staff are trained to use it.

For many other cancers too, screening is being developed, notably for ovarian and lung cancers. A big commitment within the last few months relates to bowel cancer screening. A national programme has just been launched, reflecting pressure from leading cancer charities.

Overall some significant steps forward have been taken in cancer screening and treatment over the last few years. Many women have had cancers detected early and their lives saved as a result. There remain, however, battles to be fought over extending screening to wider age groups and other cancers, as scientific knowledge allows.

Useful Contacts

A list of Cancer Charities can be found at <http://www.equip.nhs.uk/topics/cancer.html>

NHS Direct - Tel: 0845 4647 or online <http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk/>

Breast Cancer Care - Helpline: 0800 800 6000 or email: www.breastcancercare.org.uk

Information on all cancers: CancerBACUP - Tel: 0808 800 1234 or at www.cancerbacup.org.uk

Briefing Note on Women and Pensions

The recent publication of the Cabinet Office report on pensions sketched some worrying trends. The population is getting older. There will be more people living longer. With the closing of many occupational pension schemes and the poor performance of much private pension provision, more people are now being forced to rely on the state pension.

Yet state pensions are now significantly less valuable since Mrs Thatcher detached pensions from earnings twenty years ago. Large numbers of pensioners depend on the means tested pension credit. It is complicated to apply and many – over a third – do not claim. For those who do there is a big disincentive to save as they lose 50p of their private pension or savings income for every £1 of pension credit.

There are approximately 6,000 women pensioners in the Brent East parliamentary constituency. Many suffer from having very low state or private pensions in their own right; many are widows with small widow's pensions; and many have had their savings eroded by decades of inflation. Even those with good private pensions must convert their pension into an annuity giving a regular income. But annuities pay 10% - 20% less to women than men (because women have a longer period of life expectancy).

Women in their 40s and 50s may have a drastically reduced entitlement to the state pension because they paid the reduced married women's National Insurance Contributions (before the system ended in 1977). The implications were never explained by the Government of the day and 1.5 million women have found (or will find) that they are only entitled to a very small pension when they retire. They have paid £8 billion in contributions and received nothing in return. They have also lost entitlement to disability benefit.

Women in their 20s and 30s could face the same experience as their mothers and grandmothers. Few women are buying stakeholder pensions. Women on low and part-time incomes have little scope to save. They will have to rely on state pensions.

Taking these factors into account, the Liberal Democrats are advocating a citizens' pension payable to all long standing British residents, men and women, regardless of contributions. We advocate a level for older pensioners (75 and over) sufficient to avoid the need for a means test: £105.45 for a single pension; £160.95 for a couple.

Useful Contacts:

'Pensions Justice for Women' Campaigning Network - If you would like to know more about the network please write to the Liberal Democrat Pensions Spokesman, Steve Webb MP, either by post to the House of Commons, London, SW1A 0AA or by fax on 020 7219 1110. He will then forward your details on to the network's co-ordinator.

Pensions Advisory Service Helpline number – 0845 601 2923 or visit www.opas.org.uk OPAS is an independent non-profit organisation staffed by volunteer pension professionals giving information and guidance on state, personal, company and stakeholder pension schemes.