

Cambridge
Evening News
Opinion

We must
fight to keep
our freedom

WHERE will we be if the Government succeeds in curbing our rights under the Freedom of Information laws?

The answer is, back in the Dark Ages - the time before we were given the right to train the torch of truth into the murkier, secretive enclaves of the health service, local government and other public bodies.

The battle to secure the law we now have was a long one, and it would be a terrible backward step if after just two years, ministers succeed in putting up the shutters again.

Without the ability to demand answers from the powers-that-be, we would not have been able to tell our readers the full facts about MRSA infections in our hospitals, about how many of our police officers have criminal records, or about what is being done to keep our children safe from paedophiles. A host of vital information, information that public bodies would rather be kept under wraps, would simply remain buried away, and we would all be the poorer for it.

We must not allow this to happen - and we make no apologies for urging you, our readers, to lobby our region's MPs to fight it tooth and nail.

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News reveals hospital action plan as Lessons learned from fall tragedy

HOSPITAL bosses say they have tightened up procedures following the death of a woman who plunged from a fifth floor balcony.

The action plan, created by Addenbrooke's Hospital and obtained by the News under Freedom of Information laws, is designed to prevent a repeat of the catalogue of errors that led to the death of Lady Fiona Baker, 57, on April 12, 2005.

Losing a vital fax warning Lady Fiona, of Water Street, Chesterton, was feeling suicidal, and forgetting to administer medication, were some of the serious failings the Cambridge hospital admitted to.

Although a coroner said he could not be satisfied there was gross neglect of her care, the hospital apologised and promised to change its procedures.

Lady Fiona's husband, Prof Sir John Baker, Downing Professor of the Laws of England at Cambridge University's St Catharine's College, said he wanted action to prevent another tragedy.

Improvements implemented by the hospital include practices to make sure faxes are

■ CAMERON RAMOS
Health Correspondent

signed by medical staff before being filed. A check list of information to be used when patients are transferred from the Medical Assessment Unit to the wards has been drawn up.

The hospital is continuing work on improving medical cover out of hours and improved ward staff handover procedures to ensure accurate and timely information is passed on about each patient.

Reviewed and improved procedures for prescribing drugs and enhanced staff training have been introduced.

A new procedure for recognising and managing patients who might have special nursing and observation requirements, has also been implemented.

An Addenbrooke's spokeswoman said:

"We have put a great deal of effort into developing and implementing an action plan to address the issues raised following Lady Fiona Baker's

death. At Addenbrooke's we listen to our patients and their relatives, learn from our mistakes and aim to improve the quality of care we give to each individual patient.

"All the areas highlighted for improvement have been reviewed leading to a number of changes and improvements being made."

Lady Fiona, who had a history of alcohol abuse, was sent to Addenbrooke's on Monday April 11, 2005, by her GP. She was prescribed medication to keep her calm but nursing staff forgot to give her the drugs at 6pm the same day.

At 7pm Lady Fiona was transferred to ward P5, a specialist hepatology ward. A junior sister said she seemed to be calm and was not a suicide risk.

But when a doctor visited the ward to see another patient, she quickly realised Lady Fiona was psychotic and warned staff to keep an eye on her.

Lady Fiona, at 8am the next day, asked a doctor and nurses if there was a tall building so she could jump off it.

Less than 90 minutes later her body was discovered at the base of Abington House.

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NEW PROCEDURES: Lady Fiona Baker plunged to her death at Addenbrooke's Hospital.



MPs fear new Government proposals will

TODAY the News hits back on behalf of our readers at Government plans to restrict access to vital information.

For almost two years Freedom of Information (FoI) laws have enabled the News to shine a light on murky and secretive information held by public organisations, including the police, councils, schools and hospitals.

But now the Government is considering curtailing the right of individuals and organisations, including newspapers, to use the FoI laws as and when appropriate.

If proposals go ahead, authorities will be able to tot up the cost of dealing with separate requests for information from the same source, and refuse to comply once they reach a set limit.

If the plans are approved, journalists could be barred from using FoI laws to dig out facts, figures and documents the authorities would rather the public did not see more than once or twice in any three-month period. Local authorities would also be

allowed to refuse, on cost grounds, any request which involves a large amount of "thinking" time, such as requests requiring considerable internal discussion within the authority.

The region's MPs have backed a campaign demanding the

LISTEN:
Tony Blair.

Government drops the controversial plans, which Malcolm Moss, MP for North East Cambridgeshire, described as "shocking hypocrisy". He said: "This information should be freely available. Having brought in the Act, the Government should stick to it rather than attempt to price campaigners, regional newspapers and concerned individuals out of being able to access it. "This is shocking hypocrisy on the Government's part and they should drop this

plan immediately." Andrew Lansley, MP for South Cambridgeshire South and Shadow Health Secretary, said: "I am not surprised that the Government has found the process of responding to Freedom of Information requests both expensive and tiresome. But that is what the Freedom of Information Act is about. "I know regional newspapers and campaign groups have already used the FoI legislation in the last two years to discover valuable information. Perhaps the Government finds this too



battle to curb Freedom of Information Act hots up

The stories the News has broken thanks to the FOI Act...

The News' Freedom of Information successes.

■ **November 2006:** MORE than 30 police officers and 26 members of civilian police staff in Cambridgeshire are on long-term leave due to illness.

■ **September 2006:** A TOTAL of 803 children were arrested for possession of illegal drugs in Cambridgeshire and another 43 for possession with intent to supply drugs in 04/05, including an 11-year-old caught with cannabis and a 15-year-old caught dealing heroin.

■ **September 2006:** ANIMALS had to be rescued from perilous situations more than 100 times in 2004/05, including a cat trapped under a bathtub and a deer helped from a mill pond.

■ **August 2006:** POLICE disciplinary records reveal three Cambridgeshire officers have been sacked and several others forced to resign for serious misconduct in the past two years.

■ **August 2006:** STUDENTS have been disciplined by Cambridge University for offences including drunken behaviour in a library, climbing on college buildings and indecent exposure in the last two academic years.

■ **August 2006:** CHEEKY thieves pinched thousands of pounds of police property from police stations in Cambridgeshire over the last two years, including a £1,000 laptop and crime-fighting kit such as handcuffs.

■ **July 2006:** THE police helicopter cost the Cambridgeshire force nearly £1 million to run every year.



FRONT PAGE NEWS: Some of our stories which came about through the Freedom of Information Act.

■ **June 2006:** SIX serving police officers in Cambridgeshire have criminal records, five for violence and another for a driving offence.

■ **June 2006:** INTERPRETERS cost Cambridgeshire police more than £700,000 last year - the equivalent of an extra 35 bobbies on the beat.

■ **May 2006:** STOP-and-searches by police led to almost 200 arrests in Cambridge last year, with nearly a quarter of those in the city centre.

■ **April 2006:** GRAVE digging and massage are among the bizarre second jobs held by serving Cambridgeshire police officers.

■ **April 2006:** THE Fen Tiger has been spotted 38 times, with more than 20 sightings in the last five years, a police dossier revealed.

■ **March 2006:** HOSPITAL bosses raised more than £1 million from their car parks last year at Addenbrooke's and the adjacent Rosie Maternity Hospital.

■ **February 2006:** VIOLENCE among schoolgirls in Cambridgeshire has rocketed fivefold in just two years, with 27 girls suspended for violent conduct in 2002/03 and 147 suspended in 2004/05.

■ **November 2005:** BLUE and white discs in the sky, shooting stars falling to the ground and a silvery coloured floating rod were among 10 UFO sightings reported to the Ministry of Defence in the skies over Mid-Anglia in the past three years.

■ **November 2005:** COCKROACHES, rat poison and dirty kitchens were among the problems uncovered at Cambridgeshire restaurants by council hygiene inspectors.

■ **August 2005:** PARKING fees and fines cost motorists more than £8 million in Cambridge in 2004/05, with the city council raking in £6 million from its car parks.

■ **June 2005:** PATIENTS lodged complaints at Addenbrooke's Hospital at a rate of more than two a day in 2004/05, with a total of

761 complaints, of which 60 per cent led to apologies from the hospital.

■ **June 2005:** INFECTION rates of hospital super-bug MRSA rose at Addenbrooke's Hospital the month after new cleaning procedures were introduced to tackle the problem.

■ **June 2005:** EIGHT members of staff at Addenbrooke's Hospital were paid nearly £100,000 following personal injury claims, with almost £10,000 paid out to 73 patients for non-clinical compensation claims in 2004/05.

■ **June 2005:** COUNCIL Tax bills for 40 per cent of pitches at Cottenham's Smithy Fen traveller site went unpaid in 2004/05, compared with 1.7 per cent of people who failed to pay their bills across the whole district.

■ **May 2005:** A FREEZE on traffic levels in Cambridge is being planned by the county council according to figures which revealed it was expecting 170,000 vehicles to travel in and out of the city each day in 2011 - the same number as today - despite massive housing developments

planned near the city.

■ **May 2005:** HISTORIC Trumpington Street in central Cambridge is the city's burglary hot-spot, with 21 break-ins in 2004/05 - more than any other street.

■ **May 2005:** A CRACKDOWN on paedophiles, Operation Solomon, caught more than 28 internet perverts in three years in Cambridgeshire.

■ **April 2005:** MORE than 2,000 children were excluded from schools in Cambridgeshire in 2004/05, 43 of them for drugs offences, 22 for racism, eight for sexual

misconduct and hundreds of others for anti-social behaviour.

■ **February 2005:** VIOLENCE and intimidation is a part of daily life for staff at Addenbrooke's Hospital, with more than 170 incidents of aggression against them reported in 2004/05, with staff punched, bitten, kicked and spat at.

■ **February 2005:** FEWER drivers are being caught speeding in Cambridgeshire than anywhere else in the country, with just over 20,000 speeding tickets issued in 2003/04, compared with over 120,000 in Mid and South Wales.

prevent transparency and openness

embarrassing." Jim Pease, MP for South East Cambridgeshire, said: "Having introduced this Act they have already found any number of weasel ways to get round it and avoid giving out embarrassing information. They are stepping this process up to try and muzzle regional papers. "They should drop these proposals and try and live by the spirit of this law rather than change the letter of it." Shallesh Vars, MP for North West Cambridgeshire and Shadow Deputy Leader of the Commons, said: "The Government proposals will stop transparency and

openness." And Oliver Heald, MP for Hertfordshire North-East and Shadow Constitutional Affairs Secretary, said: "The proposals will damage access to information for some of the organisations whose job it is to hold the Government to account. "This is a far cry from the Tony Blair's original claim that he was going to end excessive secrecy in Government. "The Government should drop these damaging proposals." A spokeswoman for the Department for Constitutional Affairs said: "No final

decisions have been made. We have said what we are minded to do and stated that we would take stock of responses to this position. That is what we are doing." The News is backing a campaign by the Newspaper Society to stop the Government limiting the public's access to

SHOCKED: MPs Malcolm Moss and Jim Pease.

information, which has already forced Prime Minister Tony Blair to promise he will "listen carefully" to concerns from the press and public before making any decision.





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