

## Coroners To Get More Power To Prevent Future Death

On Tuesday 30<sup>th</sup> January 2007 the government released a statement stating that coroners will be given stronger powers to respond to the wish of bereaved relatives to ensure that lessons learned from sudden death, prevent the same thing happening in the future.

New powers to be included in the draft Coroners Bill will build on the existing law in four ways:

- Coroners will be able to require organisations to respond to their reports and say what action they will take to prevent future deaths.
- The coroner will be able to request a written response to his or her report within a specified timeframe and there will be an legal obligation for agencies and organisations to respond.
- The Chief Coroner, to be appointed under the Bill, will monitor the reports made and responses received.
- An annual report of these responses will be made to the Lord Chancellor and laid before the House of Commons, to ensure accountability.

Constitutional Affairs Minister Rt Hon Harriet Harman QC MP said:

“The findings of an inquest are important not just to explain how someone died but also learn lessons for the

future which will prevent deaths in similar circumstances. Currently, too often, coroners’ findings are not acted on.”

The government are trying to build upon a similar system that has been successful in Australia where the State Coroner in Victoria believes it has saved lives and claims that recommendations have led to legislative and policy changes in cases involving pedestrian safety in the workplace, tractor roll-overs, drowning of children in swimming pools, accidental child hangings from blind and curtain cords and prison cell design.

These proposed reforms build on the Coroner Reform Bill mentioned in our MHLB No.104. The main proposals set out in this Bill were:

- To reduce the number of full time coroners.
- To allow the Lord Chancellor to issue guidance and receive reports.
- To differentiate between an investigation procedure and holding an inquest.
- To allow for a route of appeal to the Chief Coroner for an ‘interested person’ (i.e. a person with a ‘sufficient interest’ in the issues surrounding the death.)

At this early stage, the Coroners Bill has received wide support from organisations such as INQUEST, a non government organisation providing a specialist service to bereaved people. Co-Directors Helen Shaw and Deborah Coles said:

“It is of crucial importance that parliamentary time is found to introduce a new Coroners Reform Bill – without

these measures the system will continue to fail both families and the public.”

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