



VOLUNTARY ACTION HISTORY SEMINARS

VAHS seminar series at the Institute of Historical Research

SEMINAR ABSTRACT

11 May 2015

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Patient Organisations and Health Consumerism in Britain, 1960s-2010s

Over the last fifty years, British patients have been made into consumers. Since the 1960s, concepts common within consumerism have found a place in health policy and practice. In a short space of time, the position of patients in Britain appears to have changed fundamentally. For instance, until relatively recently, it was not uncommon for patients to be told little about the condition that they were suffering from or its likely outcome. That such a situation would be (almost) inconceivable today points not only to changes in the doctor-patient relationship, but also to a wider shift in the way in which patients see themselves and are seen by others. This paper aims to explore how and why such a shift took place, and why it was that these changes were framed by the concept of consumerism.

Beginning in the 1960s, the activities of a number of voluntary organisations were central to the making of the patient into a consumer. Groups such as the Patients Association and the College of Health played a crucial role in the development of patient-consumerism. This can be seen in relation to seven key areas: patient autonomy, representation, complaint, rights, information, voice and choice. Such concepts were used initially by patient organisations to construct the figure of the patient-consumer, but by the 1990s the government had taken over as the main actor shaping ideas about patient consumerism. This development raises wider questions not only about the nature of patient consumerism, but also about the role of voluntary organisations in contemporary health policy and practice.