
London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine
(University of London)



CENTRE FOR HISTORY IN PUBLIC HEALTH
Department of Public Health and Policy
Keppel Street
London WC1E 7HT

Tel: (Direct) +44 (0) 20 7 927 2269/2434
Fax: +44 (0) 20 7 637 3238
E-mail: virginia.berridge@lshtm.ac.uk
ingrid.james@lshtm.ac.uk



31st January 2008

James Strachan,
Secretary to the 30 year review
C/O National Archives
Kew
TW9 4DU

Dear Mr Strachan

Review of 30 year rule

Thank you for your letter of 31 December 2007 requesting my comments on the review. My response is based on my own experience doing research on the last thirty years and using documents in the National Archives (TNA) and that of other staff members in the Centre for History in Public Health who also actively research this quite recent period of history. Our major interest is in the recent history of health policy especially policies relating to illicit drugs and to smoking.

In principle, we consider that the release of documents earlier than 30 years is a good thing, if rendered somewhat obsolete by the Freedom of Information Act. We have had no problems getting documents at TNA opened under FOI, but assume that if documents were automatically opened once sent to TNA this would remove the added layer of bureaucracy of having to request that these be opened under FOI. We have obtained access to very recent documents, for example some on drug policy from the late 1990s.

However, there are some issues that need to be examined if documents were automatically to be opened before 30 years is up:

1. The usefulness of early document release is dependent on good cataloguing at TNA and at government departments if they retain the documents. Researchers obviously need to know what is available. Presumably there would be resource implications attached to this.
2. If documents are still held by the relevant government department, how easy would it be to access these? In our experience the Department of Health has good catalogues of what it holds and has facilitated access. In contrast, the Home Office appear to have poor catalogues and this makes research more difficult. In the course of recent ESRC funded research on the history of the drug voluntary sector since the 1970s and the rise of the drug 'user group', the Home Office was unable to comply with a Freedom of Information request for access to the papers of its Voluntary Sector Unit in the 1970s. It was unable to find these in the time allowed under FOI.
3. This raises the issue of at what point would documents be transferred to TNA. Would this still happen automatically after 30 years?

4. There is also the issue of documents which might be sensitive (and therefore not made available under FOI) in say, the first 10 years or so after creation, but less sensitive in later years. Would these automatically be reviewed after a set period to see if they could be opened? Some papers I requested (of the Independent Scientific Committee on Smoking and Health) were opened for the 1970s but not for the later years because of 'commercial confidentiality'. Could these decisions be reviewed over time?

We welcome the decision to have a full discussion of the issues and would be happy to contribute further if that would be helpful.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Virginia Berridge".

Virginia Berridge
Professor of History