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Brian Abel-Smith and Richard M. Titmuss

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THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF  
ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH

*Occasional Papers*

XVIII

THE COST OF THE  
NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE  
IN ENGLAND AND WALES

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# THE COST OF THE NATIONAL HEALTH SERVICE

IN ENGLAND AND WALES

BY

BRIAN ABEL-SMITH

AND

RICHARD M. TITMUSS

CAMBRIDGE  
AT THE UNIVERSITY PRESS  
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## FOREWORD

The Director of the National Institute for Economic and Social Research, Mr W. A. B. Hopkin, has explained in his Introduction to this volume the circumstances in which Mr Abel-Smith and Professor Titmuss were asked to investigate the costs of the National Health Service.

The two authors have accomplished their task with conspicuous thoroughness and skill; and the results of their labours constitute a valuable piece of pioneer work in this field. For the first time the modern technique of social accounting has been applied in an expert manner to one of the major sectors of the social services. By these means it has been possible to trace for the National Health Service as a whole in England and Wales, and for each of its main branches, the changes in the factor cost and in the amount of resources absorbed since the Service was established. Thus it is likely to come as a surprise to many that, although the gross cost (i.e. before deduction of charges) of the National Health Service in England and Wales was £77 million larger in 1953/4 than in 1949/50, the additional volume of resources when measured at constant (1948/9) prices was £32 million, which represented an increase of less than 9 per cent.

The analysis of the costs of the Service undertaken by Mr Abel-Smith and Professor Titmuss has been of great value to the Committee set up by the Minister of Health and the Secretary of State for Scotland to inquire into the National Health Service in this country; and we have based most of Part I of our Report on the facts and findings which are set out in full in the present volume.

The fact that this study has had to be confined to England and Wales and does not also cover Scotland is a matter of regret, but it was unavoidable in view of the complexity of the work involved and the limited time available: there is however no reason to think that the inclusion of the data for the Service in Scotland would have altered the main conclusions of the study.

In my opinion the authors of this study have made a real contribution in the sphere of social accounting, and it is my hope that it may lead to similar investigations being carried out on other social services.

C. W. GUILLEBAUD

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## INTRODUCTION

This book originated in a suggestion made by Mr Claude Guillebaud, the Chairman of the Departmental Committee on the Cost of the National Health Service. Soon after the Committee was set up he asked the Institute whether it would sponsor the preparation, for the information of his committee, of a memorandum presenting an economic analysis of the costs of the National Health Service. The memorandum he envisaged would relate these costs to the size of the national income; would analyse the causes of the trends so revealed, separating, for example, the effects of price changes from the effect of changes in the quantity of productive resources absorbed by the service; would distinguish between different kinds of resources—personnel of various grades, medical and other supplies bought from outside suppliers; would distinguish between capital and current expenditures; and would attempt to assess the importance, for the cost of the service past and future, of changes in the numbers, age and sex distribution of the population. The Institute was glad to undertake the task and entrusted the preparation of the report to Mr Brian Abel-Smith, with Professor Richard Titmuss of the London School of Economics as Consultant. Their report was presented to the Guillebaud Committee as a memorandum of evidence in February 1955, and after some further revision and amplification reached the form in which it is now published.

Mr Guillebaud, in asking the Institute to undertake this work, and the Institute itself in agreeing to do so, were both proceeding on the assumption that the preparation of an economic analysis of the costs of the National Health Service was a task for research. It would not, that is to say, emerge ready-made from the Appropriation Accounts or other official records of the expenditures on the service. It may seem strange that information of a kind which would seem essential to an informed public discussion of the Health Service expenditures—a matter which has not lacked public discussion—should not have been available before. The fact is that the existing system of government accounts is not, in general, well designed to form a background for discussions of major policy issues. This does not apply only to the accounts of expenditure on the National Health Service; indeed, those accounts are in some respects above the average of government expenditure accounting. It is a general difficulty, and it appears to arise from the complete dominance

which has been exercised on the design of government accounts by considerations of accountability. Such considerations are of course vital; but it may be questioned whether their importance necessarily makes it impossible to organize—possibly as a separate operation—a set of records more satisfactory for the presentation and analysis of the real issues of expenditure policy. The reader may judge for himself whether the process of elaboration, adjustment, reclassification and analysis of the official records which has been undertaken by Mr Abel-Smith and Professor Titmuss has helped to clarify the background against which policy decisions have to be taken. If such analysis is thought to be useful, it arises for consideration whether the Government might not in future include something of the sort as a normal part of its accounting procedures. Nor, indeed, is the scope for reform on these lines confined to the National Health Service.

Allied to the problem of the accounts of the National Health Service is that of its statistical intelligence. It will appear at a number of points in the study by Mr Abel-Smith and Professor Titmuss that there is a need for better statistical records of the operation of the Service, and in particular for fuller and more scientifically organized information on the kinds of people who use it and the purposes for which they use it. It would go beyond the scope of this introduction to suggest in detail how this need should be met, but it seems probable that changes would be required both in the attitudes and in the organization of the departments administering the Service.

The conduct of this study has been made possible by the support and co-operation of a very large number of bodies, official and other, outside the Institute. For the first of the two years over which the work extended the Institute received financial support from the Nuffield Foundation, and I should like to put on record our gratitude for this most practical encouragement to the research.

Help of another, equally essential, kind has come from government departments and above all from the Ministry of Health. The preparation of a useful report depended entirely on full access to the detailed accounting and other records in the possession of the Ministry. This has been most generously accorded, and many of the officials of the Ministry have devoted time to answering our frequent and persistent requests for further information. Without such assistance it is hardly an exaggeration to say that the study would have been impossible, and our appreciation of the Ministry's help is correspondingly great. In all our dealings with the Ministry we have been able to rely on the good offices of Mr Halliday,

the Secretary to the Guillebaud Committee, as well of course as on those of Mr Guillebaud himself.

We have also received important assistance from the Registrar General for England and Wales. At our suggestion he undertook a special tabulation of the 1951 Census material to obtain data on the demographic characteristics of the hospital population. This information has been basic to the work done by Mr Abel-Smith and Professor Titmuss on the prospective effect on the Health Service of future population changes. It has also provided, for the first time, much-needed information about demand for hospital care and, in so doing, has helped the authors to extend their studies into some of the more important social aspects of the work of the health services. We are, therefore, extremely grateful to the Registrar General and his staff for undertaking these tabulations and making the results available to us. We also owe him a debt of gratitude for the comments and criticism of our drafts which we have received from his office.

Another institution on which we have relied heavily for information and help is the South West Metropolitan Regional Hospital Board. On a number of important points not covered in the records held centrally at the Ministry they were able to give us information for their area. In this way they have enabled us to deal in an informed way with important topics which otherwise could have been given only cursory attention.

These are our major obligations of gratitude. In lesser degree we are indebted to a number of other institutions. Official bodies which have given us information on particular points are:

- The Board of Trade
- The Central Statistical Office
- The General Register Office
- The Government Actuary's Department
- Her Majesty's Stationery Office
- The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries
- The Ministry of Pensions and National Insurance
- The Ministry of Supply
- The Ministry of Works
- The National Assistance Board
- The North West Metropolitan Regional Hospital Board
- The Paddington Group Hospital Management Committee
- The Scottish Statistical Office
- The Social Survey
- The Treasury
- The Whitley Councils for the Health Services

Non-government organizations which have helped us are:

- The Acton Society Trust
- The Association of British Pharmaceutical Industry
- The Association of Wholesale and Manufacturing Opticians
- The British Federation of Master Printers
- The Central Midwives Board
- The Department of Applied Economics (Cambridge)
- The Institute of British Launderers
- The Institute of Hospital Administrators
- The Institute of Municipal Treasurers and Accountants
- King Edward’s Hospital Fund for London
- The London County Council
- The National Coal Board
- The Nuffield Foundation

To all of these, official and non-official alike, I wish to express the sincere thanks of the authors and of the Institute.

W. A. B. HOPKIN  
*Director, National Institute of  
Economic and Social Research*

LONDON  
*June 1955*