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HOME SECRETARY'S STATEMENT: PRISONERS IN HOSPITAL 18 JANUARY 1996

With permission, Madam Speaker, I should like to make a statement on the use of restraints on prisoners attending hospital, particularly women who are pregnant.

The acting Director General of the Prison Service, Richard Tilt, met Caroline Flint, the President of the Royal College of Midwives on Monday to discuss the use of physical restraints on women prisoners admitted to hospital to give birth.

The discussions were constructive and I am very grateful to the Royal College for its help. I should like to make it clear that it has never been the intention of the Prison Service to apply handcuffs or chains to women who are confirmed as being in labour, and never to apply restraints contrary to medical advice. That will continue to be the case. But the Royal College has asked for certain modifications to be made to the use of restraints on pregnant women and the Prison Service has accepted their recommendations.

In future, women taken from prison to hospital to give birth will normally be escorted by two female members of prison staff. In exceptional circumstances, where this is operationally not practicable, at least one will be female. No restraints will be applied to the prisoner from the time at which she arrives at the hospital. No prison staff will be present in the delivery room, unless the prisoner requests it.

Governors will continue to be encouraged to liaise with hospital managers and midwives on these and all other security measures for women admitted to hospital to give birth.

The Royal College of Midwives has also expressed concern about the application of physical restraints to pregnant women waiting in public areas in hospitals for antenatal checks. In future, all physical restraints will be removed from a prisoner on her arrival in a hospital waiting room, unless she is judged to present a particularly high risk of escape and of course there is no medical objection to restraints being applied.

The Prison Service has a responsibility to balance the need to hold prisoners securely with the duty to treat them with humanity and to maintain their dignity and privacy. The modifications I have announced will, I believe, allow the Prison Service to strike a reasonable balance on behalf of the public. We are confident that this revised policy provides the correct balance without reducing security to unacceptable levels.

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