Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

I join the Secretary of State in paying tribute to James Titcombe and all the families who have fought so long for answers. I also thank Dr Kirkup for his excellent report. I welcome the action that the Secretary of State has announced today, but can he add to that list by saying whether we can bring forward having medical examiners to look into the cause of death before the end of this Parliament and, if not, say what the barriers to introducing that much overdue reform are? Will he also touch on recommendations 20 and 21 in the report, which refer to the need for a national review of maternity and paediatric services in areas that are remote, isolated and hard to recruit to? Indeed, the report goes further and says that the problem extends beyond those services. This is an issue we need to address to improve safety without deterring recruitment in these areas.

Jeremy Hunt The Secretary of State for Health

I am afraid I can only commit now to us introducing independent medical examiners as soon as possible. We are wholeheartedly committed to this. It is incredibly important for relatives, because where they have a concern about a death and possibly a mistake being made in someone’s care in their final hours, the availability of an independent examiner has been shown in the trials we have run to be very effective, so we are committed to doing that.

I should have answered the shadow Health Secretary on the point about a review of maternity services, because he raised it as well. NHS England is doing that review; we have already announced that to this House. Today it is publishing the terms of reference of that review. That is important, because there has been a big debate inside the health service—a debate with which many people will be familiar—about what the minimum appropriate size for maternity and birthing units is, and we need to get to the bottom of the latest international evidence.

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