I am writing to you in my capacity as Chair of the House of Commons Science and Technology Committee. The Committee is conducting an inquiry into the scientific merits of national health screening programmes. As part of this inquiry, we heard evidence on Wednesday 11 June from a GP, Dr Margaret McCartney, about health screening performed by private companies. Several points were raised by Dr McCartney regarding the evidence base, and the veracity of the claims made in advertising materials, for private health screening. Dr McCartney’s remarks are summarised below and a full transcript of the session can be found on our website.1

- The tests offered by private screening companies include “ultrasound scans, usually for the abdominal aorta and the carotid arteries in the neck; an ECG; and blood tests for cholesterol and glucose”. Dr McCartney stated that “you could have got [these tests] had you needed them, from your GP.”
- Such screening tests were reported by Dr McCartney to be “very poor” and can “lead to lots of false positives.”
- Dr McCartney stated that “the tests done are not those recommended by the UK National Screening Committee, or any other organisation.”
- If a person receives an abnormal result from a private health screening test, they are advised to see their GP. Dr McCartney told the Committee that this means the “NHS has to pick up the pieces from unwarranted private sector testing”.
- Dr McCartney recounted some research she had undertaken for the consumer body Which? and reported that “one out of six or seven companies was prepared to say that their screening tests could do harm when we asked them that specifically on the telephone.”
- Dr McCartney told the Committee that she had formally challenged some of claims made in newspaper advertisements by private health

screening companies about the tests offered. She stated that, following two judgments from the Advertising Standards Authority at midnight on 10 June, “companies are no longer allowed to say they have saved lives, because they have no evidence of doing so.”

I am bringing these points to your attention so that you have the opportunity to respond to the Committee in writing should you so wish. We would be grateful to receive a response by Monday 30 June.

Yours sincerely,

Andrew Miller, MP
Chair