

# Saving the NHS?

The National Health Service is being privatised. The process is gradual and is commonly referred to as 'patchwork privatisation'. This means that the health service is being broken up piece by piece and handed over to private control. The most recent high profile example is the privatisation of logistics services. GP practices are following, as are hospitals (now referred to as 'Independent Sector Treatment Services'). Soon the NHS will be little more than a commissioner of privately operated health services. The Government says that businesses competing for contracts will improve services and provide greater value for money. They also say that whilst healthcare is free at the point of use, it doesn't matter who provides services. The briefest of glances at other privatised public services reveals this to be a lie. This process is not about improving efficiency, it's an ideological drive to increase the influence (and profits) of business in public services. This isn't new, nor is it peculiar to this country. In fact it's even in the bloody EU Constitution, or whatever we're supposed to call it nowadays. Privately run public services are more expensive. The US (where private involvement in healthcare is most developed) spends twice as much as Britain on health (16% of GDP compared to 8%), yet 45 million Americans have no health insurance whatsoever.

This is not just a disturbing vision of the future, it's happening now. Privatisation has already cost the NHS and patients dear and there is no sign of it decreasing. In the south west, according to a report, waiting times for ambulances which serve the Royal United Hospital in Bath meant a man who collapsed with a heart problem waited 70 minutes for an ambulance and an elderly woman lying on the pavement with a broken hip for an hour and a quarter before such professional help arrived. It isn't the fault of the staff but the bureaucrats and the insane targets. There just isn't enough ambulance cover. The north-east Somerset region has no doctor on duty at night, it was deemed too expensive. Instead people have to find their way into Bath to receive attention. Workers also suffer in this bright new privatised future. Just ask the healthcare workers providing dementia care services in north Bristol, paid less than £14,000 per annum for a job few could do in a private, non-unionised workplace with poor working conditions, ropery health & safety and petty managers lauding it over them. The result? High staff turnover and compromised patient care.

Yet the so-called Labour administration (which has never served the interests of labour) is wasting billions on IT systems that don't work: £20 billion has been earmarked for the NHS IT system. Needless to say private firms are coining it in working on futile efforts to get the system up and running. Even the private IT

contractors have said that the system, expected to cost £7.6 billion more than estimated, is doomed to fail.

Risks in Private Finance Initiative (PFI) deals are supposed to be transferred to the private sector in the interest of “efficiency” (according to the then Chancellor, the “prudent” Gordon Brown, another Labour Thatcher admirer) yet these contracts are notoriously biased in favour of private interests, with “risks” factored into the public tenders so they appear to be more expensive. The taxpayer will inevitably pick up the bill for the failures: contracts are “renegotiated” or “benchmarked” if they don’t suit the privateers. Some risk when you can’t lose.

“Forward payments” (subsidies) are handed to profit makers who have yet to provide the goods contracted for. So much for “payment by results”. PFI contracts mean we, the people who fund these disasters and suffer the consequences of inefficiency and downright cock-ups, will be paying to keep the profits rolling in for decades to come. No wonder those who have kept anything like the NHS from the working people of the US are gobbling up contracts over here. There are rich pickings in the exploitation of suffering.

Politicians are liars, that’s how they get the job, so we should never trust them to look after our interests, particularly in matters associated with health care, where we are most vulnerable. The present Minister of Health used to be the union baron of the postal workers’ union, fat lot he knows about it then. So he’s just the man for the job, just like the former state health bureaucrat and now ‘disappeared’ Patsy Hewitt.

This is the 21<sup>st</sup> Century not the 19<sup>th</sup> and we need a socialised form of health care where the whole of the NHS is organised and directed by those who work within it in association with patients’ groups. A transparent system, run in the interests of all, not party and state careerists or profit-hungry parasites. To achieve this means organising in a different way: Solidarity Federation exists to act as a catalyst for change, to enable the building of necessary institutions that are not under the control of any political party and formed by and in the interests of users and workers.

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