

Want to fix the NHS? Go private

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Published: 7:22PM GMT 27 Nov 2009

One of Labour's great triumphs with the National Health Service is that people now go into hospital to die rather than to be cured. It seems to render the whole debate about assisted suicide utterly pointless. Who needs a Dignitas clinic when you can check into a hospital in Basildon and be relatively certain to be taken out in a box?

It is a further achievement of our monitoring, regulating culture that even the monitors and the regulators don't seem to have a clue how bad things are – or they certainly didn't in Basildon. This exposes one of the great pretences of the NHS: that it is there first and foremost for the benefit of patients. It isn't. It exists these days mostly for the benefit of various trade unionists who are fully paid-up members of the Brown clientele, and who earn good money as petty bureaucrats trying to "manage" things that, if they need to be managed at all, could be far better done by fewer people in much more efficient systems.

The Government and its apparatchiks have been quick to say that the monitoring regime will itself be better monitored (*quis custodiet ipsos custodes*, as they no longer say in the schools Labour is also wrecking). What they seem slower on the uptake about is how the hospitals can be improved, and people can be prevented from dying unnecessarily in them.

There is a solution, but it would really put out of joint the noses of the clientele. When a hospital fails in the way that the Basildon and Thurrock Trust has, it should be turned over immediately to a private-sector hit squad to sort it out.

This does not mean violating the terms of the 1946 Act that set up the NHS, and depriving people of a health service free at point of use. It means that the people who provide them with that service do not work for the state, but for contractors employed by it. I can understand that this would upset Leftists in all parties – including in the Tory party, whose policy on the NHS is to do everything identically to Labour – but that would be too bad. The maintenance of the ideological purity of the politically motivated should not be put before the lives of those to whom the state has a duty of care: but that is precisely how things are at the moment.

What, indeed, is to stop the Department of Health from selecting the 10 worst-performing hospitals in the country (though getting accurate data by which to measure their iniquity is clearly, for the moment, a problem) and putting them all out to tender to the private sector? Something similar happens with failing schools. They are bad enough: but a failing hospital is a matter of life or death, and demands radical attention.

The state would pay the private sector to deliver health care to the people through those hospitals. It could be done on three- or five-year rolling contracts, with penalty clauses and scope for immediate termination if the businesses could not do the job properly. This would, of course, entail the providers making a profit, which is what the Leftists claim to hate. But when they cry that "no one should make a profit out of health care", they forget that lots of people already do: from those who work in the NHS to its every supplier – drugs companies, equipment manufacturers, building firms. It is time that preposterous argument was buried once and for all.

It comes down to the point that any politician who willingly allows the present inefficient – and indeed lethal – set of arrangements to pertain will have blood on his or her hands. Does that worry them less than the vested interests of the health service unions? We shall see.

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