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COMMENT

NHS: the faith to fight

Practitioners need to become ‘political clinicians’ to save the NHS as a joined-up entity, free at point of delivery and paid for by general taxation

The White Paper on the health service, put together in just six weeks, is the biggest onslaught on the founding principles of the NHS since its establishment in 1948.

Giving the majority of the NHS budget to GPs – some £70billion – is an open invitation to private healthcare companies to substantially increase the 4% of NHS services that they currently provide. Their first loyalty is to their shareholders, not to the ethos of the NHS. Decisions on hip replacements at your local hospital could be made by a company in the US Midwest.

What is depressing about the coalition is that it was presumed that the Liberal Democrats would act as a brake on their partners. In fact, the party of Lloyd George, Maynard Keynes and William Beveridge (the architect of the welfare state) has its foot on the accelerator with the same ferocity as the Conservatives.

The rapidity of this ‘reform’ risks social cohesion, and as the state is pared down Big Society is meant to take over, with thousands of volunteers to emerge (from where?) to take over its responsibilities.

As its founder Aneurin Bevan said, the NHS ‘will last as long as there are folk left with the faith to fight for it’

Unite health sector members need to move beyond their everyday role as clinicians to become more political with a small ‘p’ – to be advocates for local needs, and to make the case for a unified and universal NHS, not only with managers, but with MPs, opinion formers, patient and community groups and the media.

What health secretary Andrew Lansley is proposing is untested, rushed, probably very expensive to implement and with no guarantee that services to patients will dramatically improve.

While the White Paper is hurried into being with only cursory consultation, the Conservative manifesto pledge of 4200 more health visitors appears to be parked in the slow lane. And what is happening to the 2004 promise that every one of the 3300 secondary schools in England would have a specialist school nurse by 2010 who would also look after the ‘feeder’ primary schools? We are light years away from achieving this.

The state has been fundamental to health and educational improvements over the last century because the previous ad hoc arrangements – heavily reliant on charities and private philanthropy – were inefficient.

Up to 40% of army recruits to the Boer War were unfit for service because of rickets and other poverty-related diseases. This led to the 1903 Committee of Physical Deterioration, which recommended medical inspections for children and free school meals for the poor.

The case for the state to have the overriding responsibility for the nation’s health is watertight, but it will have to be fought for. As its founder Aneurin Bevan said, the NHS ‘will last as long as there are folk left with the faith to fight for it’.

For the Unite 4 Our NHS campaign, see: www.unitetheunion.org/health

Karen Reay

Unite national officer for health