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Letters to the Editor



NHS reform is a 'potential disaster'

Sir, Radical reform of the NHS in England is expected to come a major step closer this week, with publication of the Health and Social Care Bill. As unions and professional organisations representing the 1.3 million staff who make up the NHS, we are extremely concerned that the Government is not heeding the warnings about key elements of the proposals. We recognise the need to provide NHS services more cost-effectively, but we believe this can and must be achieved without taking unnecessary risks and damaging care.

One of the major concerns is the role that the NHS's economic regulator, Monitor, will be given to ensure that any willing providers, including NHS and voluntary organisations, and commercial companies, are able to compete to provide all NHS services. In addition, the 2011-12 operating framework for the NHS, published last month, revealed that providers will be able to offer services to commissioners at less than the published mandatory tariff price.

There is clear evidence that price competition in healthcare is damaging. Research by economists at Imperial College shows that, following the introduction of competition in the NHS in the 1990s, under a system that allowed hospitals to negotiate prices, there was a fall in clinical quality. With scarce resources there is a serious danger that the focus will be on cost, not quality.

Enforced competition will also make it harder for NHS staff to work collaboratively in multidisciplinary teams, across organisational boundaries, to create the integrated care pathways that patients want and need, and that will help to make services more efficient.

Furthermore the sheer scale of the ambitious and costly reform programme, and the pace of change, while at the same time being expected to make £20 billion of savings, is extremely risky and potentially disastrous.

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