

HEALTH EMERGENCY

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Winter crisis warning as Trusts await Brown's billions

Warnings are growing that the new money pumped into the NHS this year will come too late to avert yet another winter crisis, in what could be the run-up to the next general election.

Half of 150 hospital Trusts and more than half of the 85 health authorities surveyed by the Press Association this summer believe that social services will not be able to cope with the rising demand to support discharged hospital patients over the winter months.

A third said they expected supplies of flu vaccine to run out.

Pressures

The government has handed out an extra £212m to help the NHS deal with "winter pressures" this year, £150m of it for England.

London's health chiefs are hedging on any commitment to use the capital's share (£23.4m) to open extra beds.

Desperate shortages of nursing staff mean that managers have shied away from promising any specific number of additional intensive care beds, after being caught out last year promising 47 "extra beds" – at least 10 of which never opened.



UNISON strikers at Dudley Hospitals Trust fighting a PFI deal which would transfer them to private contractors, with loss of conditions including NHS pension. They are demanding that support services are separated out of the PFI project.

Longer queues for care in Wales

NUMBERS of Welsh patients waiting over 12 months for in-patient treatment are now almost double the number the government inherited in 1997.

In March 1997 6,247 patients had been in the queue for care for 12 months or more: at the end of July 2000 the total was 12,380 – more than 15% of the total waiting list.

Perhaps even more worrying is a more than three-fold increase in numbers waiting over 18 months – from 1,402 in 1997 to 4,832 at the end of July, a massive 245% increase.

The strains on the system are also shown in the increased delays getting out-patient appointments: numbers waiting over 6 months to see a consultant have rocketed seven-fold from 6,000 in March 1997 to almost 42,000 at the end of July this year – a mammoth 600% increase.

PFI = Pure Financial Incompetence

The wheels come off!



THE GOVERNMENT's new NHS Plan calls for a massive expansion of hospital building – almost all of it to be financed by the controversial Private Finance Initiative (PFI).

According to the Plan, by 2010 the NHS will be paying rent and service charges on hospitals, clinics and health centres worth £7 billion, while upwards of £600m of NHS assets will be sold off.

But PFI money comes at a heavy price for patients and NHS staff. Legally-binding, index-linked contracts will siphon off tens of millions of

pounds from Trusts' revenue budgets each year, squeezing the resources for development of clinical care and community-based services.

Health unions, the BMA, campaigners and opposition parties have also consistently warned that PFI hospitals – designed as they are by accountants and business consultants working for profit-seeking consortia, almost always lead to a big cut in bed numbers.

The extension of PFI could put thousands more beds at risk, even while the NHS Plan promises to open more acute and intermediate beds.

Ministers argue PFI hospitals are built to higher quality and opened on

time. But the first two PFI hospitals to open – in Dartford and in Carlisle – have brought a chapter of cock-ups, poor design and shoddy construction.

In Carlisle, staff and patients face the greenhouse effect of a glass roof and no air conditioning.

Dartford disaster

In Dartford, taps ran dry in the operating theatres, bringing elective surgery grinding to a halt. In both hospitals there is already evidence that too few beds are now available to meet peaks of demand for emergency admissions.

NHS staff caught up in PFI schemes

face a threat to their pay and conditions if they are transferred to private contractors. Ministers have claimed that PFI deals could be drawn up to exclude support services: but in practice no such deals have been done. When Dudley health unions demanded that they remain in the NHS, the Trust replied that it was under government pressure to stand firm.

As 600 UNISON members in Dudley begin a third spell of strike action to defend their pay and conditions, it is clear that ministers' promises on PFI are worthless: the scheme is already discredited: it should be ditched before it does more damage to the NHS.

