

Say NO to ConDem rationing boards!

The ConDem government's White Paper 'Liberating the NHS' makes many controversial proposals, but at its heart are two key factors: the fragmentation and privatisation of the NHS – and £20 billion of spending cuts by 2014.

The scale of these “efficiency savings” guarantees that even while it appears to give GPs greater control over services, the opposite is the case.

With tight budgets and cuts to be made, consortia of GPs established to spend £80 billion in commissioning budgets will inevitably become little more than *rationing boards*.

Far from improving services they will have to choose which services will be cut and which sections of patients should be excluded from treatment.

To accept this would not be “liberation” for the GPs or their patients: it would be a capitulation to the ConDem government.

As the debate over the White Paper begins to widen, it's clear that there is a strong and growing opposition to many of its core proposals, even among the group who appear to have most to gain from it.

GP magazine found fewer than one in five of the 300 GPs who responded to an online poll believed that the changes would improve patient experience or the funding of primary care services.

Twice as many (41 percent) feared a fresh “postcode lottery,” while 71 percent expected the scrapping of PCTs and SHAs to lead to an increase in private sector involvement in commissioning. 60 percent of responses in a poll on the pro-White Paper National Association of Primary Care website also opposed the government's commissioning plans.

No wonder one of the leading apologists for the scheme, Dr Michael Dixon of the NHS Alliance, has issued a rather desperate appeal for GPs not to turn their backs on the government proposals, claiming that it would be “utterly disastrous” if they did not “embrace the White Paper and make it work”.

But of course Dr Dixon has got it the wrong way round. The real disaster would be for GPs and their organisations to allow themselves to be cynically used by the government to push through proposals which will have far-reaching and negative consequences for patients as well as for the NHS and its one million employees.

It will also be a disaster for tens of thousands of hospital doctors: the proposals could effectively privatise health provision and reduce England's NHS workforce from almost 1 million to virtually zero by 2014.

Despite these problems, at present the BMA is committed to “engage critically” with consultations on the ConDem plan.

This is a mistake. Indeed if the NHS Alliance, the Royal College of GPs and the BMA, along with the health unions which have already declared themselves against the proposals, simply took a firm stand against the White Paper, and marketisation and privatisation of health care that are implicit in it, the ConDems would not be able to carry out their plans.

Until a few weeks ago the BMA was conducting just such a campaign, now sadly sidelined as they struggle for influence with Mr Lansley.

Perhaps the biggest reason for standing up against these plans, which could effectively transform the NHS into a National Health Market, with no public sector providers, is that there is absolutely no evidence that these expensive, experimental reforms – the biggest-ever privatisation of health care anywhere in the world – could deliver the promised improvements for patients.

It's all looking like a mess waiting to happen.

The cost of implementing the White Paper (upwards of £1.7bn) seems like a classic waste of money much better spent on patient care.

But from the point of view of Andrew Lansley and his Tory colleagues, if it resulted in denationalising the NHS, reversing the great legacy of Nye Bevan, and opening up a new £100 billion market to private companies, it would be seen as money well spent.