

'The days of patients waiting years for healthcare could soon become the norm again'

POLITICIANS IN Northern Ireland have once again allowed tribal politics to take precedence over issues such as the state of the health service.

As elected representatives argued over the minutiae of policing and justice, the news that Northern Ireland's Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety was to be hit with an additional £113m budget cut (on top of an almost impossible target of £700m efficiency savings) barely seemed to register.

So-called 'soft targets', such as care for older people and mental health, have already been badly affected. Now cuts are starting to hit waiting lists, it is only a matter of time before health is propelled back into the spotlight.

Some doctors have recently reported that patients are waiting as long as six

months for inpatient appointments — almost double the government target time.

It is expected that the next government figures will show patients are waiting longer for treatments.

Of course, health chiefs will no doubt argue that the swine flu pandemic and the freezing weather are largely to blame. No one can argue they have not played a part, but many healthcare professionals believe a short-sighted approach to tackling waiting lists — by throwing money at the private sector and failing to invest for the future — has had a more significant influence.

BMA Northern Ireland council chair Paul Darragh said: 'The current method of paying the private sector to deal with lists represents poor value for money and results in a loss of revenue that would be better spent improving the ability of the health service to solve this problem.'

'Waiting lists are not just another set of statistics; they are about real people.'

'More time spent waiting for an operation can translate into increased pain, suffering and anxiety for patients. This can mean a more prolonged recovery, leading to more time off work, which also impacts on the economy in terms of decreased productivity.'

Only a few years ago Northern Ireland held the unenviable position of having some of the worst waiting lists in Europe. A range of initiatives led to the situation improving drastically, but shrinking budgets and the short-term focus of the current approach mean the days of patients waiting years for healthcare could soon become the norm again.

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