

# Rage against the market

Reports of the spiralling costs of the privatisation of the NHS and compromised standards of care have compelled doctors leaders to campaign against the government's increasingly common use of the market. Lisa Pritchard looks at the BMA's progress

**LOOK AFTER OUR NHS**  
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**I**T IS a message with which BMA members are very familiar: there must be less commercial-sector involvement in the NHS.

Doctors have been expressing their concerns about the increasingly common use of market forces in the health service.

Since last June, their fears have found a focus through the BMA's Look After Our NHS campaign, which has been highlighting the problems associated with embracing privatisation.

Patients and the public are now being

encouraged to have their say.

BMA council chairman Hamish Meldrum says doctors have been urging the association to take its anti-commercialisation message to the public. He says: 'Doctors believe that, like us, patients and the public will be outraged at what is happening to their NHS when they know the facts.'

The BMA has produced a public information pack, which members in England should start receiving next week. It will carry everything doctors need to know about the campaign to pass on to their patients, including:

- A letter from Dr Meldrum explaining the background to the campaign
- A brochure for doctors setting out how commercial-sector involvement is damaging the NHS
- Posters
- Questionnaires.

Leaflets, posters and a letter from Dr Meldrum will be sent to all practice managers and local negotiating committees who will be urged to display them in public areas of surgeries and hospitals.

The public leaflet incorporates a quick reply card, which will help the BMA better understand the public's views.

Dr Meldrum adds: 'Public support will be crucial if we are to get all parties to acknowledge the folly of these policies.'

The association hopes that, particularly in a general election year, politicians from all parties will be more prepared to listen to public demands for an end to private-sector involvement in the NHS.

BMA News has been investigating doctors' claims of how private-sector involvement has been affecting their work.

It has uncovered a number of examples of patients being denied choice because they had an underlying mental health condition.

Several doctors came forward to say that when they tried to access treatment at private-sector facilities for their patients, they were unable to do so — even though the patients' mental illnesses were under control and unrelated to their need for other treatment.

And NHS London admitted it was renegotiating its contract with a private diagnostics provider because of concerns it was not getting value for money. A GP expressed disquiet because private provider InHealth was paid £145,000 for diagnostic procedures that patients did not have owing to a clause in the contract signed with the company.

## Stand up and be counted

Doctors have been signing up to the eight principles the BMA says it wants to see at the heart of the NHS, while the fun online Christmas card with a serious message — 'fat cats' stripping the letters c, a, s and h from the words National Health Service — was viewed more than 15,000 times.

The BMA has been far from a lone voice in expressing its concerns about commercialisation in the NHS. Trade union Unite has also been running its Health B4 Profit campaign, with similar aims to the BMA.

Entrepreneur Peter Hayes, who

## Hands off our health service

The following is an excerpt from the Look After Our NHS brochure

THE NHS has become a market offering many lucrative openings for private-sector providers of a range of services.

They have been lured by generous and preferential long-term contracts, the systematic exclusion of potential NHS providers from bidding for independent sector treatment centres and other services, and the commitment by senior ministers to incorporate private companies into the 'NHS family'.

There are also unresolved doubts over the quality of services delivered by some private-sector providers. At primary care level, market incentives encourage the view of patients as 'customers' with freedom to 'choose' between walk-in centres, with care provided by nurses or GPs, and more traditional practices, but which threaten to undermine the special quality of primary care in which patients establish a



long-term relationship with their GP — just as GPs get to know individuals, families and communities. Big, impersonal

'polyclinics', sometimes located further from communities and handling large numbers of patients, not only lack the human contact and approachability of GP practices but also risk increasing costs.

Staff who do not know their patients so well may refer more and manage risk less, therefore losing that crucial gate-keeping role which, when compared internationally, provides good value for money. GPs on NHS contracts fear that commercial companies will seek to cut costs.

Patients will face a higher turnover of medical staff, undermining continuity of care, as companies reach the end of short-term contracts and are replaced by another company.

became chair of what was the Macclesfield Health Authority, recently condemned the internal market in the NHS, which he had helped to introduce, as 'hideously expensive'.

Former health minister Lord Darzi, whose name has become synonymous with opening up the primary care market through so-called 'Darzi centres', has admitted that the days of PFI (private finance initiative) deals could be over.

Scotland and Wales, meanwhile, have refused to follow the same path as the NHS in England while Northern Ireland had to suspend its waiting-list deals with the private sector as part of cost-cutting procedures. The BMA in Northern Ireland is lobbying against restarting such deals.

Just this month, Scotland passed a law blocking commercial companies from taking over NHS general practice.

So, can the Look After Our NHS campaign change politicians' hearts and minds during an election battle?

Even though the Labour Party, the Conservative Party and the Liberal Democrats claim they will continue with market-based policies should they win power, there has already been a shift of emphasis within the government.

Health secretary Andy Burnham declared last year that when commissioners put services out to tender, the NHS should be the 'preferred provider'. Fresh guidance on exactly what that means is due to be published by the Department of Health later this month.

As the new brochure points out: 'Sixty-one years on from its inauguration, our NHS, free at the point of use and funded through general taxation, is still a fair, popular and cost-effective health system delivering quality care and we aim to ensure it remains so in years to come.'

'That's why we are determined to Look After Our NHS.'

Find out more at [www.lookafterournhs.org.uk](http://www.lookafterournhs.org.uk)

## The BMA wants an NHS that:

- Provides high-quality, comprehensive healthcare for all, free at the point of use
- Is publicly funded through central taxes, publicly provided, and publicly accountable
- Significantly reduces commercial involvement
- Uses public money for quality healthcare, not profits for shareholders
- Cares for patients through co-operation, not competition
- Is led by medical professionals working in partnership with patients and the public
- Seeks value for money but puts the care of patients before financial targets
- Is fully committed to training future generations of medical professionals.

