

I want to tell you a story – one of the Government’s success stories, according to John Reid. See what you think.

MRI scanning is an invaluable tool for imaging just about every part of the body. Most hospitals of any size now have at least one scanner, but we don’t have enough machines or skilled staff to keep waiting times down to acceptable levels. We don’t like this any more than the Government do, and would welcome any sensible initiative to reduce waiting times. And of course, politicians like ‘initiatives’. They make good stories for the papers, and give the impression that something is being done. Their answer in this case was as simple as it was predictable – call in the private sector. Mobile MRI scanners would be driven to our hospitals on a rotating basis to eat into those waiting lists, and the contract was awarded to Alliance Medical in July this year. Informal conversations suggest that they were a bit surprised to land the whole contract, and some observers have been uncharitable enough to point out that at the time it was awarded, Alan Milburn, ex-Secretary of State for Health and close pal of Tony Blair, was being paid almost £30000 a year to sit on the board of Alliance’s parent company. Anyway, the Alliance scanners are now visiting hospitals around the country.

So what’s the problem? Well, there are several. Many of the hospitals benefiting from this initiative have their own MR scanners standing idle for much of the week because they can’t afford to staff them, and extending the working day beyond 9-5 to tackle waiting lists is particularly difficult. So we now have a situation where the Alliance lorry is in the car park scanning patients, while the hospital’s own MR unit is locked and deserted. Scarce NHS cash is being handed over to Alliance, who clearly need to make a profit from this scheme, when the money could have been spent more effectively (but with less kudos for the politicians) by employing NHS staff to run the idle machines inside the hospital. And then once the scans have been done, they need to be reported by a radiologist. Alliance aren’t allowed to use NHS consultant radiologists for this role, so some of the scans are being sent to Belgium to be reported, others are being looked at by radiologists imported from abroad. Despite assurances from Alliance and the Government, we don’t know what training these doctors have received. Some of them may be highly skilled, but NHS colleagues involved in MR scanning are concerned about the quality of many of the reports they have seen. And getting enough patients through the Alliance scanners to make the process even remotely cost-effective has not been as easy as the Government anticipated. Patients are given the choice of going to the private machines or waiting for a scan in their local hospital. In at least one hospital, when too few patients chose the private option, managers were instructed to increase the numbers sent to Alliance in order to fill their ‘quota’. So much for patient choice.

Mr Reid will tell you that I’m just another NHS consultant concerned for the effect of all this on his private practice. However, I don’t do MR scanning myself, and like the majority of consultants in the NHS, I don’t do any work in private hospitals. I’m just frustrated, as most of us are, that the Government can always find the cash for these crowd-pleasing initiatives, but has no interest in the quality of the resulting service. This failure to consider quality was highlighted in a recent highly critical report on the Alliance debacle by the five ‘cluster leads’ who oversee the 28 Strategic Health Authorities responsible for performance management of the NHS. They had no input into a recent analysis of Alliance’s performance, and are clearly very unhappy about it. Their report is devastating, confirming all the reservations that health professionals have expressed since the scheme was first mooted. Describing the current situation as ‘parlous’, they highlight the fact that the service was launched

before Alliance had the machines or the staff to fulfil the requirements of the contract, and that insufficient attention was paid to quality. Critically, the report confirms that the lack of suitably qualified radiologists to report scans is an issue. Reports that are supposed to be available within three or four days of the scan have been taking six weeks to arrive, and a particular worry is the fact that brain scans are being reported by general radiologists, not the specialised neuroradiologists who would be available in NHS hospitals. The report's authors state that scans have been mis-interpreted as a result, with potentially serious consequences. They make a number of recommendations to retrieve the situation, one of which is that there should be a relaxation of the 'additionality' requirement that prevents Alliance from employing properly-trained NHS radiologists to do this work. If they agree to a U-turn on this issue, it would beg the question of why the Department of Health don't also give radiologists and radiographers the resources to allow them to do the work on their own MR scanners, rather than boosting the profits of a private company.

This story neatly illustrates the reasons why so many health professionals are disenchanted with New Labour. While hospitals in Leeds and elsewhere close wards and impose vacancy freezes in a vain attempt to balance the books, the politicians are happy to pour money into the pockets of private providers in return for a second-rate service. This 'never mind the quality, feel the width' approach is no way to run a health service (or education, or the criminal justice system.....)