

A White Paper on Health? – it must be Tuesday then. Actually, like many NHS workers, I freely admit that I don't know what day of the week it is. We are struggling to meet a bewildering array of targets, deliver the patient choice agenda, and Payment by Results (don't ask). So, we need another White Paper like we need the proverbial hole in the head (although if you are unfortunate enough to actually *need* a hole in your head, the neurosurgeons have done all their operations for this financial year, so you'll have to wait). Some of the contents of this not-so-eagerly-awaited legislation have been leaked. Now, working on the assumption that the Department of Health are only likely to leak what they think are the best bits, it looks as if this White Paper has been put together, like so much of Whitehall's output over the past few years, on the back of a fag packet, and not subjected to critical appraisal by anyone with a bit of common sense.

First the 'health MOTs'. It seems that these will take the form of a questionnaire filled in by patients at key stages in their lives, and aimed at detecting risk factors. These will be assessed by.....well, I'm not sure who by, but presumably by one of those health care workers who don't have enough useful things to do with their time. So, if you answer 'yes' to the question that says 'are you a lard-arse who takes no exercise, smokes heavily and drinks to excess?' you will be told to mend your ways and eat more fruit – and that's how we are going to tackle the epidemic of heart disease. Let me tell you something. Every Tuesday morning I report about twenty cardiac scans on patients with symptoms of life-threatening coronary artery insufficiency. At least five of those will be on young patients in their forties and fifties, with a bad family history of heart disease. They are grossly overweight and smoke. They have watched their family members die prematurely of heart attacks, have developed symptoms, really scary symptoms, that have led their GP to refer them to a cardiologist, and now they are having radioisotopes injected into them to see how bad their coronary arteries are. Yet many of them have actually put on weight between their referral and the scan, and are still smoking. Does anyone really think that the results of a questionnaire, and advice from a nurse or dietician, are going to have a greater effect than the exhortations of their GP and cardiologist, and the premature demise of their loved ones? Yes, of course that's an extreme example, but the fact is that you'd have to be a hermit not to know how to live a healthy life; half the country spends its evenings glued to *You Are What You Eat* and *Celebrity Fat Club*, with little noticeable effect. I'm not saying we should just give up on health education, but the fact is that good GPs (and that's most of them, despite what you read) are already doing this in their surgeries. Duplicating that work in this ineffective and expensive fashion is a waste of resources, and is yet another example of government by focus group – giving the public (or as the government view them, voters) what the Guardian readers of Islington want, rather than using the money to fund health care interventions of proven value.

And then there's the Sunday Times headline 'Flying surgeons to offer local ops'. Apparently surgeons are to be taken from their hospitals and sent out to GP surgeries to do operations like hernia repairs, that don't require general anaesthetic. This idea presumably surfaced in a post-prandial haze of cigar smoke, and sounded good to the politicians and civil servants around the table. It means that patients get their treatment close to home, rather than having to travel to their local hospital. So let's just think for a minute: why does the garage ask you to take your car to them for a service, rather than coming to you? Well, it's because it would be much less efficient

to have skilled mechanics wasting time on the road travelling from house to house, when they could be mending cars. Also, if they find something unexpected, the garage will have all the facilities they need to deal with it. And of course, if they came to you, they'd have to charge more, because they would be servicing fewer cars every day, due to all the travelling. The same is true of surgery. A single GP surgery simply wouldn't have enough patients needing this type of operation to keep a surgeon busy, so practices would presumably have to band together. But if you are travelling four miles to a neighbouring GP's surgery, why not go to the hospital in the first place? This proposal also seems to assume that 'minor' surgery is easy and risk-free. I have seen a patient almost bleed to death at a hernia operation. It doesn't happen often, but on this occasion, blood was immediately available for transfusion, and a vascular surgeon came to theatre and repaired the damaged vessel. In a GP surgery, the patient would probably have died. Mrs Hewitt also seems to have overlooked the fact that we don't have lots of surgeons surplus to requirements sitting round twiddling their thumbs, so taking them away from hospitals doesn't seem like an awfully good idea, although she may be counting on attracting surgeons from Europe and elsewhere to do these operations (and then go home at the weekend, leaving the NHS to pick up the pieces).

It does get a little tedious seeing politicians wasting scarce resources on ill thought-out schemes, simply in order to seem to be doing something. Despite the evidence of this article, doctors are not a bunch of Luddites, wedded to outmoded models of health care. Enormous changes have been delivered in recent years, but now we need a period of calm to let them bed in. This Government, on the other hand, seem to see stability as an admission of failure, hence the succession of hare-brained schemes like the suggestion that youngsters guilty of anti-social behaviour should be hauled off to a cash dispenser by the friendly community copper and made to hand over a fine. Or that GPs should be paid extra not to sign sick notes for patients who claim they can't work. That these ideas actually see the light of day is disturbing, and this White Paper is more evidence that our political masters suffer from a sad lack of what my mum used to call 'gumption'.