

Bob Bury: Why we must watch closely the strange new world of NHS care commissioning



Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt

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ON a damp evening, I found myself sitting in a pub bar with a couple of dozen other people, talking about the commissioning of medical services in Leeds. ‘Now there’s a man who needs to get a life’ you are thinking to yourselves, but bear with me.

I have written here before about the Government’s [Health](#) and Social Care Bill (HSCB) and the obsession with the private sector as the solution to the NHS’s supposed deficiencies. A vigorous public campaign to get the Bill dropped came very close to succeeding, but the opportunity was missed, and

the HSCB completed its passage. Andrew Lansley has now predictably been dumped, but we are stuck with his “reforms”.

After licking my wounds, I hadn't taken much interest in the mechanics of the implementation of the HSCB, until I was roused from complacency by an email from the 38 Degrees group.

You may be familiar with them – in addition to organising national e-petitions on a number of current topics, they also bring people together to tackle issues at a local level, and that's what we were doing in the pub on that Tuesday evening.

We were a disparate group. Just two doctors, myself and a paediatrician, along with a trade unionist and the [chair](#) of the Health Scrutiny Board of the city council. Predominantly, though, this was a group of patients concerned that the NHS was at risk of being fragmented and sold off to the private sector, potentially sacrificing service quality to the profit motive.

Now, I could go on at length about the setting-up of Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) and the need to influence their constitutions to minimise the risk of “cherry picking” by the private sector, but your eyes would glaze over and you'd move on to the sports pages. Which is just what the Government is relying on – this issue is deemed by many in the media to be too complicated for their consumers to understand, and there is a danger that the HSCB will be implemented by stealth, without anyone noticing until it is too late.

Although I was sufficiently interested to be at that meeting, I knew very little about what was actually happening on the ground. Well, now I know a bit more, and so I thought I'd try to engage your interest by concentrating on the position in Leeds.

There are now three CCGs in place – Leeds North, Leeds West and Leeds South & East – and they will become responsible for commissioning (*ie* purchasing health care) from next April.

If anyone doubts the pressure they will be under to grant contracts to private sector providers wherever possible, those doubts should have been dispelled by Jeremy Hunt's appointment as Secretary of State for Health. This is a man who has called publicly for the NHS to be denationalised, and who allegedly tried to get the celebration of the NHS removed from the Olympic opening ceremony.

In his own constituency, he has called for the local NHS Trust to be taken over by Virgin Care in a deal worth £650m, and of course, he has a track record of partiality to big business – as Culture Secretary, he acted as a cheerleader for Rupert Murdoch in the BSkyB affair and, in the opinion of many commentators, should have resigned.

So the CCGs will be under pressure, and if you think that any encroachment of the private sector is all in the future, think again. Of the 114 GP practices covered by the three CCGs, 28 are currently run by Assura Leeds LLP, which is a partnership between the practices and Virgin Health. Yes, it's Richard Branson again – the same outfit that Jeremy Hunt is so keen on in his own neck of the woods.

How certain can we be that the CCGs will resist political pressure, and insist that any change in provision is based on the ability of providers to give a quality service?

Well, the [chair](#) and three other board members on the Leeds West CCG, and one board member of the Leeds North CCG, work in those Assura practices I mentioned earlier. Interestingly, since I started writing this piece there have been rumours in a medical blog, apparently confirmed by a report in the *Health Service Journal*, that most GPs have surrendered their financial interests in Assura, to avoid a possible conflict of interest.

What isn't clear is just how much difference, if any, that makes when the GPs concerned are still working in partnership with Virgin.

I'm not questioning the integrity of any of the people involved, and any discussion in Leeds West CCG concerning a business tender from (or in competition with) Virgin will hopefully take place in a room with several empty chairs if those board members with an interest are excluded. Does this mean that their decision will be based purely on the merits of the bid? We can only hope so, but the fact that this situation has arisen indicates the need for vigilance in the post-HSCB world.

The response would no doubt be that those GPs on CCGs who are not associated with Virgin are equally likely to be biased in favour of public provision. But would that be such a bad default position at a time when the NHS is under pressure to slash costs without reducing the service?

We certainly shouldn't be diverting any of that scarce cash into the pockets of shareholders in Virgin or the many other commercial providers circling hungrily for NHS business.

I accept that the CCGs are not our enemies, nor do I doubt their good intentions. However, I am not convinced that public providers in the NHS will be competing on a level playing field with the commercial outfits, and we clearly can't trust this Government, and especially not Jeremy Hunt, to ensure impartiality. So we need to be vigilant, and that means all of us taking an interest.

So, at the very least, log on to the 38 Degrees website, look at their sensible proposals for ensuring fairness in the commissioning process, then add your name to the petition to ensure that those sound constitutional principles are adhered to in your CCG.

We need to let Mr Hunt, and the CCGs, know that we are watching.