



United Health is taking over your GP surgeries – what will this mean for you?

What has happened?

UnitedHealth Europe, a private profit-making company, has been made preferred bidder for the contracts to run GP practices in Normanton and Creswell. The deals are the first of their kind – an experiment in using the private sector to provide primary care services for the NHS.

What is UnitedHealth Europe?

UnitedHealth Europe is one of the businesses belonging to the UnitedHealth Group - a US-based multi-billion dollar health care corporation – the biggest of its kind in America.

Why is such a big corporation interested in two small Derbyshire practices?

Every year the government spends billions of pounds on the NHS. This is a potentially lucrative market that private sector companies want to break into. Companies like UnitedHealth are lobbying hard to get the government to spend more NHS money on them. UnitedHealth is at the forefront of efforts to place primary care services in the control of private companies. The two practices in Normanton and Creswell will be seen as 'loss leaders' – UnitedHealth may not make a profit from them but it will gain entry into the primary care market which may come to be worth millions of pounds as the government encourages more private involvement in the future.

Why should it be a problem who runs the practices?

United Health has one interest – profits. It will look for ways to cut costs, increase revenue and expand its market share. Ultimately a UnitedHealth doctor is answerable to corporate bosses who are in turn accountable to UnitedHealth shareholders. Research shows that the entry of for-profit providers into the health care market results in poorer quality care and less value for money. If successful, what is happening in Creswell and Normanton will be repeated across the country, changing the face of the health service – that is why it must be challenged.

There aren't enough doctors for these areas. Surely a United Health practice is better than none at all?

In the case of Creswell there were 17 other bidders including local and experienced NHS health professionals. UnitedHealth won the contracts despite having no experience of providing GP services in the NHS. There are serious questions as to what criteria were used to select UnitedHealth from the other bidders by local PCTs. We need to know if Trent SHA, the authority that covers both practices, is deliberately and inappropriately favouring United Health and whether this is part of a broader aim to increase the role of profit-making companies in the NHS.

If we fail to stop this development, we could be on a very slippery slope heading towards a commercialised market place for primary care that would be bad for doctors, bad for patients and bad for the principle of fair and accountable health care for all. We could see surgeries being merged and unprofitable practices being closed and it will be difficult for the public to challenge decisions made by private companies according to commercial logic.

What can people do to resist?

- Organise petitions, use the local press and ratchet-up political pressure to re-open the tendering process.
- Lobby the Local Authority's Overview and Scrutiny Committee to look into the deal.
- Scrutinise the contracts – demand the publication of the data on costs and terms, and on how United Health won the rights.

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