

Britain spends less on healthcare than the rest of western Europe – yet our life expectancy is around the European average. We spend far less than the US – yet women in Britain live as long as American women and men live longer than American men. Most people, most of the time, in most parts of the country, get a good deal from the health service.

Yet ministers have made clear that they are dismantling the NHS. They have admitted there is no limit to the amount of NHS work they are prepared to farm out to the private sector. They are replacing a health service with a health insurance system.

The basis of the NHS is the pooling of the risk and cost of health care. The public pays in to a general pool that meets the risk and cost of their health needs. In turn the risks and costs of their treatment are spread across the NHS, which provides all treatments, whether simple or complex, cheap or expensive.

The government claims that, under its new system, the public will still be able to get free treatment. Perhaps they will; maybe they won't. What is certain is that the cost of providing that treatment and care will no longer be spread across the NHS. Instead the government is paying the private sector to cream off the easier, cheaper and less risky treatments. That leaves the NHS to do the more complex, more expensive and more risky work and at the same time to be responsible for accident and emergency services, providing care for the mentally ill and the chronically ill, as well as bearing the cost of providing professional training.

Is this outsourcing to the private sector saving the taxpayers' money? Quite the reverse. It is costing extra. The government is actually paying the private sector an average of 11 per cent more per operation than NHS hospitals get for the same work. So the taxpayer is getting nine operations for the price of ten from the private sector.

The government has guaranteed the private sector a specified number of patients each year. It won't give the same guarantee to NHS hospitals. Not content with that further advantage, the private sector demanded and got a commitment that if the specified number of patients wasn't referred to them for treatment they would still get paid for operations that weren't carried out. So primary care services are being forced to refer patients to private hospitals and staff are even being employed to persuade patients to go to them.

So taxpayers' money intended for NHS hospitals is leaking out into the private sector in ever increasing amounts. As a

If it isn't broke...



It will cost more, it won't work as well and it isn't popular. **Frank Dobson** wonders why the government is set on dismantling the NHS

result, NHS hospitals are going short and for the first time since 1997 are cutting back on services and closing beds, wards and clinics.

All this is being done because of the government's dogmatic belief in competition and the need to treat patients as customers who should 'shop around'. All the evidence shows that most people don't want to shop around. What most people want is a prompt, quality service from their local hospital, their local community services and their local GP. They want the money spent on patient care and the professionals who do the caring. They don't want it squandered on glossy brochures, public relations consultants and marketing companies. But that increasingly is where their money is going. Recent polls show that nearly 90 per cent of the electorate believes the NHS should be run as a public body and not by private companies for profit.

Since 1997, record numbers of new

hospitals are being built, primary and community service premises improved, new and better equipment installed and above all the number of trained staff, doctors, nurses and midwives is increasing and they are being better rewarded for their valuable work.

They aren't motivated by competition and market forces; they are motivated by the public service ethic and a commitment to their patients and fellow citizens. It was that dedication that kept the NHS alive during the Tory years of shortage and under funding. If the public service ethic served us so well then, why should the government – the Labour government – deny the staff of the NHS the opportunity to show how well it can work with the benefit of the massive increase in resources that the government itself has provided?

What the government is doing is neither right nor popular – a fatal combination in politics.