

A PASSENGER-LED JUMBO JET?

Matthew Severn

Professor Wendy Savage visited Lancaster this month to speak on behalf of ‘Keep Our NHS Public’, a rainbow coalition of political parties, healthcare professionals and healthcare interest groups. Professor Savage was until recently an adviser to the Department of Health. She addressed a public meeting on the latest round of NHS reforms, and in particular about her belief that there was a ‘privatisation’ agenda. Inevitably a meeting such as this attracted a variety of interested members of the public with highly personal agendas. Steve Dealler took Matthew Severn to see what lay behind the rhetoric and the media hype.

Professor Wendy Savage, a one-time ‘radical’ gynaecologist who was embroiled in arguments with the medical establishment over the medicalisation of maternity provision, has again made her feelings known about the NHS – only this time it is not medical practice but government policy that is under fire.

Professor Savage is severely critical of the government’s NHS reforms, which she feels encourage privatisation and undermine the values and the efficiency of the NHS. The government has dropped her from its advisory body because of her stance.

Professor Savage began with criticism of the government’s policy of contestability, claiming ‘there is no basis in fact that private facilities will improve efficiency within the NHS.’ She outlined what she sees as a waste of resources in the NHS, stating that hospital inefficiency is actually increased due to the policy of primary care trusts (PCTs) being forced to commission 10-15% of elective surgery. She feels that this is draining money away from the PCTs, leaving them unable to afford to keep waiting lists down. In particular the policy of ‘payment by results’ came in for a rebuke, as the National Tariff in her view failed to take into account key local variables which campaigners feel leads to local health trusts having to cut services in order to meet the deficits.

On reorganisation and reform policies, in particular the vogue for a patient-led service, she advocated an alarming comparison: **‘You wouldn’t want a passenger-led jumbo jet!’** On management control of professionals she declared, to wide approval, ‘You should just give surgeons time to operate and beds – they enjoy doing it!’

On recent developments in the NHS she singled out the general practitioner services in Derbyshire and Dagenham which had been handed over to private health companies (United Health Europe for the former, and Care UK for the latter), the privatising of commissioning procurement and the

controversial sale of NHS Logistics to DHL, which has resulted in the first strike in the health service for 18 years. She expressed concern that the NHS is being subjected to market-driven policies, the aim of which is to convert services into commodities and to have a workforce that is orientated towards profit, whilst getting the government to underwrite the risk. The ultimate result of all this, she claimed, would be a commercial-driven health service resembling the American system, which, despite its costs, is unable to provide equity of care.

Paradoxically her views this time coincide with those adopted by the medical establishment. The recent British Medical Association (BMA) Annual Representative Meeting opposed the government’s plans. Its resolution restates its belief in the core values of the NHS, which it declares ‘cannot be maintained if the NHS is broken up and tendered to private corporations.’

After the meeting was over, the Journal was fortunate to have a brief word with Professor Savage.

MBMJ: ‘Professor Savage, why should doctors care?’

WS: ‘When the NHS came into existence in 1948, consultants were glad to have a career structure. After 60 years in the NHS, the vast majority of doctors believe in its values. No-one is still working who predates the NHS; all doctors now have grown up in it.’

MBMJ: ‘What can doctors do to support this campaign?’

WS: ‘Support the BMA’s position. People still believe in doctors, they have a role to play. Join ‘Keep Our NHS Public’. Doctors need to explain to their patients what is happening in the NHS, and provide concerted responses to consultations. **Doctors need to stand up and be counted.**’

It was clear from the meeting and the interview that Professor Savage was very passionate about the NHS. The case she made against an agenda of privatisation was compelling. Whilst the Journal’s editorial stance is neutral – it is primarily a clinical journal – it echoes the concern of the local healthcare community about the current round of reforms and what Professor Savage refers to as privatisation. There is, however, one element of her argument that we can enthusiastically and fully embrace – when it comes to reforms, the medical profession cannot afford to ignore them. The current approach to centralisation of control is a matter of concern to this journal and leads this correspondent to consider that he most certainly wouldn’t want to fly on a passenger-led jumbo jet.