

OLD GREY MATTER ARTICLE
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Doctors diagnose the Future NHS

Recently, in an open letter to the Guardian, Britain's most senior doctors told politicians to "put their money where their mouth is" and fund the NHS properly. They said that our NHS will be put at risk unless it has the money it needs. Most of us trust doctors more than we trust politicians so I make no apology in reproducing it here. The more people who get to see this letter, the more will they be better informed on the matter.

"Recent polls showing that the NHS will be the main issue for many voters in the forthcoming general election reflect how much our health service is valued by all sections of society, but also how worried the public is about its future. People are right to be concerned. The NHS does a fantastic job of providing excellent patient care that's free at the point of access, but frontline services are increasingly buckling under the pressure as they struggle to meet the changing needs of an ageing population within a budget that is failing to keep pace with ballooning demand. As GP surgeries, hospital wards and community services come under growing strain, whoever forms the next government will have to take tough decisions about how the NHS is funded.

NHS England chief executive Simon Stevens has recently set out a landmark vision for the future of the NHS in his Five Year Forward View strategy document. It makes a compelling case that the delivery of care should be increasingly integrated around individuals' particular needs, backed by a strengthened primary care sector better equipped to empower them to stay healthy and out of hospital wherever possible. This vision has received widespread support from both patients and healthcare professionals, and represents the best chance of safeguarding the future of the NHS. However, we fear that the political will to make it happen is missing.

Mr Stevens has made it clear that, to deliver his plan, the next government will need to invest at least an extra £8bn a year in the NHS by 2020. This will help to close the estimated £30bn funding gap that will have emerged by the end of the next parliament. It would not be money to pay for more of the same, but resourcing that would help to transform the NHS into a service fit for the tough challenges of the 21st century. Clearly, this represents a substantial investment, but retaining the status quo will cost taxpayers more in the long term.

All the major parties say they want to maintain the NHS as a service that delivers excellent patient care, free at the point of access. But voters, concerned about the future of their health service, will want to see the parties vying for their support putting their money where their mouths are and pledge to increase investment in the NHS in line with the sums for which the politically neutral Mr Stevens is calling. The NHS has been consistently ranked as one of the most equitable and cost-effective health services in the world by the independent Commonwealth Fund, but this status will be put at risk if we don't fund it adequately.

We therefore call on all the political parties taking part in the general election to commit formally to investing £8bn a year more in the delivery of healthcare by the end of the next parliament, in order to safeguard the future of the NHS. Without such a firm commitment, voters may view the promises of the political parties as being nothing more than window-dressing."

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