

OLD GREY MATTER ARTICLE  
Submitted to the EADT and published January 10<sup>th</sup> 2015

Crisis – What Crisis?

Recent media reports such as ‘The Guardian’ tell of the crisis of lack of staff in hospitals and A&E units struggling to cope with the sheer number of patients coming through the door. “Type 1” A & Es, emergency departments based at hospitals in England, treated and either admitted or discharged just 83.1% of arrivals within the politically important four-hour target in the week ending Sunday 21 December. The NHS constitution states that 95% of all A&E patients should be dealt with within four hours. David Cameron and other ministers have regularly pledged to meet that and other key NHS targets, but performances gradually worsened during 2014. The 83.1% record low is the lowest weekly performance against the target since A&E records began in 2004.

More hospitals in East Anglia are declaring a “major critical incident” as they fail to cope. Hospitals are regularly having to increase their bed capacity by opening overflow or “contingency” wards where they can admit and treat extra patients, and hiring extra staff to provide care there, though smaller bedded hospitals such as at Lowestoft and Halesworth, that used to alleviate ‘bed-blocking’ have been closed.

Speaking before the publication of the figures, the health secretary, Jeremy Hunt, acknowledged the NHS was under immense pressure, but insisted the four-hour target was being met in 90% of cases. These remarks contradicted those of his Lib-Dem colleague Norman Lamb, who said the NHS was not meeting its targets. Andy Burnham, the shadow health secretary, said the government should take emergency steps to help the NHS cope. “These figures are extremely serious ... and show that our National Health Service today is under extreme pressure all round the country,” he said. “The secretary of state hasn’t put plans in place to ensure the NHS can get safely through the winter. He must urgently do so.”

The BMA demands urgent improvements to the overall system of NHS care to relieve the mounting pressure on hospitals. “Patients should be treated on the basis of need, rather than arbitrary targets. Growing pressure on services throughout the year means hospitals have no spare capacity to deal with the winter spike in demand. So patients are enduring delays in their treatment, and the NHS finds itself running just to stand still”, said Dr Mark Porter, the BMA’s leader.

The Royal College of Nursing said A & E figures were evidence that the overall health and social care system was in crisis and demanded proper funding to fix the growing problems. “Patients and hardworking staff are being let down by a system which is in crisis,” said Dr Peter Carter, the union’s chief executive and general secretary. “Hospital trusts trying to recruit more staff have been hamstrung by the short-sighted cuts to nurse training places, which mean there simply aren’t enough nurses in the system. This is made worse by chronic under-resourcing of community services and social care, which means more people end up in A & E who could be better treated elsewhere. Nothing short of a long-term strategy, and a significant long-term investment in our health service will put an end to this crisis,” Carter said.

This situation confirms what the National Pensioners Convention (NPC) have consistently proposed, ie to fund the NHS from general taxation. So, as predicted, a major battle-ground for the election in May is emerging!

Christopher J. Brooks, Chair,  
Suffolk, and Anglia Region,  
Pensioners Assns. (NPC)

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