

RIP Free NHS Care

This was the headline in the The Mail on Sunday for a piece by Sir Thomas Hughes-Hallett, the Chair of Chelsea and Westminster NHS Trust. At his last Board meeting he had congratulated his executive team for limiting the deficit in the first quarter to £0.5m. Little was said about the Trusts historic deficit which must be enormous. They clearly have no intention of paying it off. It is this sort of attitude to financial control that will kill free NHS care.

The current pressures on the NHS affect the whole system not just the Trusts in London. Many Trusts, despite the difficulties, have buckled down and taken the tough decisions required to keep them in balance. The NHS will only remain free at the point of need if it is managed responsibly.

Ministers are partly to blame for the current problems by telling Trusts to increase staff to improve safety despite knowing that in some Trusts this would simply exacerbate an existing financial crisis.

All NHS services should be safe. If safety cannot be assured and remedial action cannot be taken the service should close. If the services at risk are important enough funds and staff should be transferred from less vital services.

The NHS should never knowingly manage unsafe services. Some of Sir Thomas's ideas for the future I warmly support including "Health Force " but his primary duty as Chairman is to manage today.

In some Trusts the level of historic debt may be realistically unmanageable. Those responsible are probably long gone.

Rather than pour short term relief cash into the NHS the Department should seek a deal with the Treasury to write these historic debts off.

If and only if, a Trust can operate for a full year within their income all or part of their historic debt should be written off.

If this cannot be done the Board should resign and let another team sort the problem out. This solution will be unpalatable to those Trusts that had taken the pain of keeping within budget but they may have to swallow the solution for the wider good of the NHS.

The NHS cannot continue to race downhill at this rate.

Brian Edwards

Former NHS Trust Chair

