

The agony of A&E: letter from Save Our Hospital Services (Devon) May 16 2022

Johnny Mercer MP is surprised and angry that the NHS in Devon is under stress (*Plymouth Herald*, 11.05.22). Sadly it is no surprise at all to health campaigners, who have for years begged local MPs and County Councillors to intervene in the degradation of Devon's health services.

First we had the closure of community hospitals, leaving many elderly people an hour or more from treatment. This was supposed to be fixed with 'care closer to home'. Instead funding for community services has been slashed. This means, as Derriford's most recent inspection found, patients 'cannot be discharged in a timely way' from hospital wards to the community. Then Devon Doctors, the out-of-hours GP service, was placed in special measures (again) because its staff can no longer 'provide safe and effective care'. This means even more patients end up as emergency cases. And finally, an urgent review has begun into SW Ambulance Service after months on 'black alert'. No wonder the Care Quality Commission says there are 'significant concerns in urgent and emergency care' at Derriford. It's most recent inspection of A&E (October 2021) could not even be completed because the situation was so bad: *'there were continually patients being cared for in ambulances outside a crowded emergency department'*. Things seem to have got even worse since then.

Of course this is not the fault of hard pressed doctors and nurses. In fact the CQC blamed a *lack* of staff for the problems it found. The latest Board papers from Derriford show an ongoing crisis in retaining and recruiting health care staff. No surprise there either, when they have worked through a global pandemic with no sign of a decent pay rise or any serious workforce plan for the future. Nurses are already using food banks in our area, and the cost of living crisis will erode the value of their wages further. Buildings don't treat patients: doctors and nurses do.

The most recent Board meeting heard that the Conservative Government's budget for Derriford (2022-23) demands *'an efficiency level of c.5%. The Committee noted that such levels of efficiency have never been delivered by the NHS in a single year.'* The promised new emergency department, that Johnny Mercer has made a personal campaign of, is not a 'new hospital' at all but an essential upgrade on buildings that are in some places more than 50 years old. The £3.7 billion his boss Boris Johnson has promised for new buildings is a drop in the ocean compared with a 'maintenance backlog' of £9bn that has built up over the last decade. That means money that should have been spent on NHS buildings but wasn't, because hospitals had to raid their capital budgets just to keep wards open and frontline staff employed.

Who could be to blame for all of this?

Covid certainly made a bad situation worse, but other economies stepped up to the challenge. In the UK, the independent Nuffield Trust has found that 'structural vulnerabilities' undermined the NHS when we needed it most: *'the UK experienced high rates of Covid infections acquired in hospital, partly due to the lack of testing capacity, outdated building design, and high levels of bed occupancy... This is in part a product of consistently low levels of investment in health care'*.

Since 2010, the Conservative party has been in charge of the NHS, and overseen the *'consistently low levels of investment'*. More and more services have been contracted out to private providers, often Conservative donors and cronies, behind the blue 'NHS' logo. Johnny Mercer's Conservative colleagues in County Hall have ignored the warnings of Devon health campaigners and our requests to intervene.

Now the NHS in England is being broken up into 42 new bodies called Integrated Care Systems (ICS), something the Conservatives and their healthcare lobbyists have been planning since they came to

power. Our Devon system is already described as ‘one of the worst performing’ in England: 1500 people are waiting more than two years for treatment. Under the Health and Care Bill, central government budgets will be cut back further, and there will no longer be any accountability to local people. Instead, national campaign group *We Own It* points out: ‘*people who work for private companies or who have a financial interest in private healthcare can sit on the Integrated Care Boards*’ and decide how local budgets are spent. Local Boards also have national targets for outsourcing (privatising) key parts of what used to be the NHS – the new build at Derriford may include private diagnostic services and elective (non-emergency) operations, for example.

Devon campaign group Save Our Hospital Services (SOHS) do not believe this is in the interests of patients. We are concerned that the new system breaks up the NHS and removes its accountability to local voters. It will mean more crisis, disruption, and privatisation, worse health inequalities, and more people waiting in pain as Johnny Mercer did. But it does not have to be like this. Mr Mercer can lobby his fellow Conservatives for a change of heart. Instead of an ideological commitment to privatise and ‘rationalise’ he can ask that patients and NHS staff are put first. He can support our campaign to keep private companies off the Devon ICS Board. This Government’s record of crony contracts must not become the way we do things here. Please, don’t let private companies take over any more of our health services in Devon. They have an appalling record of handing back contracts when things get difficult. They cherry-pick the services they want, leaving the NHS to deal with urgent and complex cases. Their profits depend on cutting corners and cutting staff. They are not better value for money, as the National Audit Office has shown.

Johnny Mercer can demand that the NHS continues to provide the care we deserve, fully and publicly funded, which is what the vast majority of voters say they want. We’ve had 75 proud years of the NHS in this country. Don’t let it be on his watch that the decade of decline becomes a death spiral.

Save Our Hospital Services (Devon)