

John Lister (Keep Our NHS Public, London Health Emergency); Opening Speech

Why health campaigns together?

Because we need a new united, broad-based response to fight back and maximise the opposition. Because we're facing the biggest ever attack on our national health service – far bigger and more determined and more relentless than the attack begun by Margaret Thatcher.

We are up against an unprecedented threat and we have to start to organise in a new way, to pull together and build on local campaigns, link them together, with unions, with the broader fight, to challenge this government.

The attack takes several forms. There's the freeze on funding since 2010: the meanest ever period for funding the NHS. In real terms, virtually zero actual growth. And the Stevens Plan is to find £22 billion of savings from the NHS up to 2020.

This is austerity, big time, in the NHS. But on top of that we have the chaos caused by Andrew Lansley's Health and Social Care Act. The deliberate fragmentation. The deliberate organisation of the NHS to open up as much possibilities for the private sector as they possibly could.

We have over 200 CCGs obliged by the legislation to put more and more services out to tender and in some cases doing so, with conflicts of interest meaning contracts are starting to go to places where GPs are having a personal financial interest as well. Other GPs drawn on to the CCGs have decided it's too much work and have pulled out.

Some trusts are massively expanding their private work.

Even where a competitive tender goes to an NHS-led bid, we have the chaos caused by contracting. The millions wasted in consultancy fees. The management time diverted from frontline patient care. Dislocation of services as they are taken from one NHS provider and given to another, with all the chaos that creates.

Then we have the chaos with GPs: the NHS can't recruit or retain GPs and GPs are leaving for different countries, GPs breaking under the strain of working 12-13 hour days; GPs finding their share of the national health budget is falling. And then Ministers say they want them to deliver a 7-day service, despite the fact no one wants them.

This is the opposite of evidence-led policy. This is policy despite the evidence, that it's not working, it can't work. The other thing that can't work is the various plans that have been talked about since the 1990s for diverting patients from hospitals into care into the community.

Where is the care in the community? There isn't any. It's diverting patients away from hospitals to look after themselves at home.

So they come into A&E in big numbers. So the hospitals are inundated and then they can't discharge them from their beds because the Tories have smashed social care as well. They have smashed it, with staff now rushing around on zero-hours contracts, quarter-hour appointments and all that nonsense. It's a service designed by people determined they are never going to use it themselves; a

service designed by people who have taken no care whatsoever about the future care of older people.

And we have the threat that NHS managers must balance their books by 2018-19. How are they going to balance their books? Now they have been told that if necessary they should do it by sacking staff. This is a sure-fire formula for wrecking the NHS. That's what has now been given the green light.

Eighty eight per cent of finance managers don't believe Simon Stevens' plan is working. The Stevens plan is based on wishful thinking, on improvements in public health to help the NHS. What's happened? They've cut public health budgets. Wishful thinking on reconfigurations: there's no money for reconfiguration so all you have is plans to cut hospital beds.

But the private sector is also running into all kinds of problems. A whole series of private sector failures: never forget Hinchingsbrooke Hospital, where Circle pulled out after proving to all they are incapable of running an NHS hospital. They just left a growing heap of debt behind, along with a disorganised, bullied and demoralised staff.

Remember, Cameron only has a majority of 12. When Major had a majority of more than that, we managed to split the Tories off one by one by campaigns around defending local hospitals. So we need local campaigns: a network of them.

Why have Health Campaigns Together? Because if we are together we can divide them. If we are together we can fight for local services. If we are not together we watch them take us on one by one – and some even draw the conclusion the Tories can only win.

We can beat this Tory government. We need to work together. We need the strength of the trade unions, the strength of the local campaigns: we need to build until they can't ignore us any more.