

Cutting back...

Who pays for those "savings"?

Government ministers now claim that privatisation of ancillary services — and the generalised process of competitive tendering now imposed by almost all health Districts — have "saved" the NHS in excess of £13 million last year.

£2.4 million of this is apparently from ancillary workers accepting redundancies and cuts in their own wages and bonuses under new "in-house" tenders, which cut hours of work to compete with outside firms.

Another £10.7 million has been "saved" by handing services to private contract firms, most of whom offer to do cleaning work in anything up to 50% of the hours previously worked, and who have torn up established NHS conditions for the thousands of low-paid women workers who form their largely part-time workforce.

The bald government figures on cash "savings" take no account of the real cost of the increased workload foisted upon nurses by understaffed and incompetent domestic service contractors: nor of the growing costs

of ensuring adequate management inspection of the cowboy firms which have been seen to cut corners and slash standards at every opportunity. In some Districts, full-time managerial staff have had to be allocated to keep watch on the contractors.

In reality the whole £13 million "saving" has been snatched from the purses and wallets of low-paid NHS ancillary staff, and from patients, who are suffering an ever-worsening standard of care as a result of the relentless drive to cut back staffing levels.

Ministers are less keen to catalogue the disasters and failures of privatisation: but out of 114 tenders allocated by March this year an appalling high number have led not only to a toll of redundancies but to a barrage of complaints, fines against private firms, and even the sacking of contractors who fail to meet specified standards. A few examples spell out the story:

*One of the most quoted failures in privatised laundry — the Sunlight contract at Cheltenham — has resulted in the firm being sacked and the work being awarded "in-house".

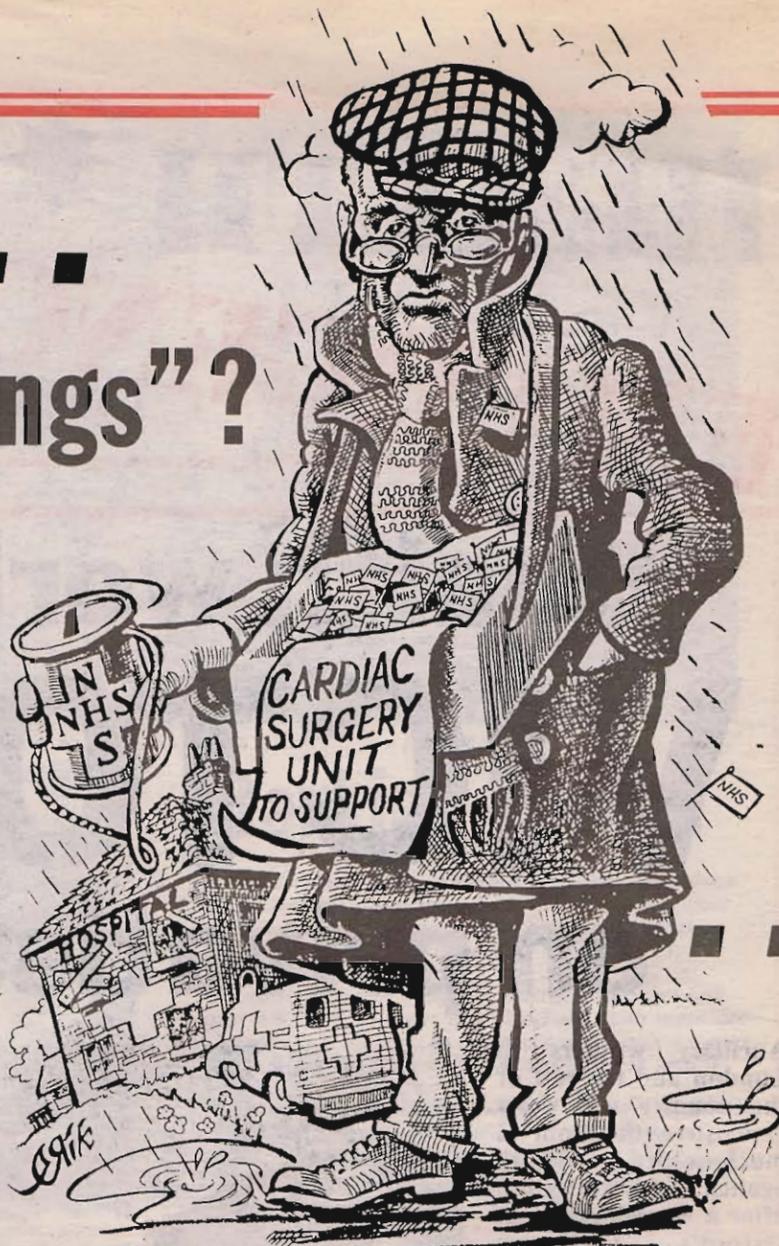
*In Worthing, the successful tendering firm, Reckitt Cleaning

Services, backed out when they realised they could not deliver the specified service. The DHA opted then for an in-house tender — only to be told by minister John Patten to reconsider their decision.

*In Bromley, after 6 months of sub-standard work by contractors HHS, the DHA gave them their marching orders — to the horror of Minister Kenneth Clarke, who promptly issued directives to instruct DHAs to consult the DHSS before sacking any incompetent firm.

Time and again direct ministerial pressure is emerging as the main factor in securing and maintaining private contracts for ancillary services. DHAs like Wandsworth which opt for in-house tenders to preserve standards are being told by ministers to employ less satisfactory but "cheaper" contract firms.

This is no success story: it is not doing anything to improve NHS services. And even if the alleged "savings" of some £13 million — mainly in London and the South East — were real savings, they pale into insignificance against the cuts in cash limits on DHAs.



NHS "Taken Bad"

A new report "Taken Bad — the State of Health in Tower Hamlets" published this week by THIRRC (Tower Hamlets Information Research and Resource Centre) and Tower Hamlets Health Campaign, assembles a mass of evidence to show that the "most deprived borough in the country" desperately needs more money poured into it.

The report comes at a time when the local Health Authority has lost £4.5 million in three years from central government and the local council is slashing its social services budget by over £2 million. It details how

Tower Hamlets has:

*"bare minimum GPs"

*the highest birthrates and deathrates in the North East Thames Regional Health Authority

*over 20% of its residents living in "unsatisfactory" conditions

*huge "unmet needs" amongst the borough disabled — in a local survey over 40%

needed aids for living but did not have them

The authors say "by assessing how services are inadequate and unsatisfactory, we can get an idea of how they could be better and what it is we actually need". To this end they urge readers to join the local Health Campaign and support the plans for a Peoples Inquiry into health in Tower Hamlets.

Local pensioners joined a lobby of NW Thames RHA on the final day for objections to its devastating 10 year regional strategy. The plan calls for the axing of one fifth of the region's acute beds (mostly in London) and 5,000 lost jobs. Demonstrators from all over the region are expected on Monday July 8, when the strategy is voted on at the Region's headquarters in Eastbourne Terrace, W2. More details from London Health Emergency (01-833-3020).

Free to close for 5 weeks

While the Royal Free Hospital has been making the headlines with its unorthodox and accidental additions to patients' diet, less noticed has been the plan to close the hospital to non-emergency admissions for a five-week period covering the whole of August.

This desperate move to cut back on patient care is in response to an overspend in excess of £237,000 in February, and budget cuts totalling £861,000 since April.

Royal Free management point to the example of Whipps Cross hospital in Waltham Forest DHA, which closed down to non-urgent cases for 2 weeks last summer and claimed savings of £50,000. The plan at Royal Free is to close 3 acute wards and some outpatient clinics, and cancel routine operations. The result, they hope, will be a saving of £100,000.

Another result, of course, will be an extra 5-week wait for patients already on Hampstead DHA's waiting lists.

Since even this draconian cut-back will solve less than one eighth of the financial problem of the District, Hampstead patients will no doubt be waiting with some trepidation to see what desperate remedies are proposed to cut back the rest.

Less beds

The latest government figures show an overall reduction in the number of NHS hospital beds. When the government took office in 1979 there were 361,670; in 1983 there were 343,091 — a cut of 18,579, or 5% over 4 years. Since then cuts in London (which were proportionately higher) have been stepped up; the forthcoming 10-year plans for the Thames regions involve even more closures.

In a possible sign of times to come in London, East Dyfed health authority in Wales is proposing to make 100 staff — including 75 nurses — compulsorily redundant, as part of a swingeing £1.5 million package of cuts in the rural district. The cuts arise from the government's refusal to fund NHS pay and cost increases. The authority will also close 80 beds, and refuse to replace equipment.

Meanwhile in South Manchester 300 jobs are to be axed and eight wards closed in 2 hospitals in a bid to save £3 million. Children and geriatric patients will be among those hit.

Bloomsbury's £7 million cuts

Unions representing ancillary, nursing, technical and white collar staff have got together to launch "Bloomsbury Health Workers Against the Cuts", publishing a bulletin entitled "Unite and Fight". The immediate cause of this move is the brutal cuts even now being implemented by Bloomsbury DHA in a bid to cut £20 million off the annual budget in 10 years, and £7 million this year.

Cuts on this scale cannot be carried out without hitting patients — and Bloomsbury's cuts will hit both patients and staff. 155 beds are to be closed — 97 of them immediately — bringing the total of beds cut since 1982 to a staggering 425.

Cuts so far planned however would "save" only £3.4 million. Even more closures are expected as the DHA aims to trim another £3.6 million to hit its original target, and even more to compensate for inflation and the government's under-funding of this year's

After years of lobbying and other forms of action — including a strike by the National Union of Seamen — had helped to keep them open, Greenwich DHA has finally voted to close the popular St Nicks and Dreadnought Seamen's Hospitals, in a bid to meet their restricted cash limits. Campaigners have pledged to fight on against closures.



pay awards to nurses and ancillaries.

The last year brought a 14% cut in ancillary jobs, with a further 20% cut planned at the UCH and Middlesex Hospital. Some cleaners are having their bonuses cut from 35% to 25%, while their workload is increased.

Management is threatening that if staff do not accept increased effort for less money all 1800 ancillary jobs will be endangered by putting services out to tender.

The Bloomsbury campaign urges ancillaries to reject this brazen blackmail, and defend their jobs and conditions calling on nurses to give support. Nurses themselves face redundancies, while newly-qualified nurses will have to scramble for only 29 vacancies in the District.

Other cuts planned include the closure of the casualty unit at the Middlesex Hospital, which handles 25,000 patients a year. Management claim that these can be treated at the already overloaded casualty at UCH. Staff working there don't agree.

Bloomsbury's cuts take place against a background of a 12,700 strong waiting list, and unemployment in Camden running at 1 in 6.

COCKROACH CORNER



If you can't beat them, eat them. As long as they are properly cooked and carefully served. That is the advice from our culinary correspondent Ivor Belliaque following the recent press headlines on cockroaches found in food at London's Royal Free Hospital.

"Cockroaches are served up in a range of dishes the world

over. They add a piquant flavour and deliciously crunchy texture to any meal — savoury or sweet," reports Ivor. "In large quantities, carefully prepared, they can be turned into a paste not unlike peanut butter."

Other dishes recommended by Ivor include the French-style "Coquerche au vin", the German "Sauerkokrotshe", the American "Roachburger", Turkish kebab-style, or the Mexican Chile con Cuccaracca. For traditionalists, there is always the old fashioned British Roast Haunch of Cockroach with a stuffing of

cockroaches, health authorities are reportedly turning to ways of exploiting the economic advantages of this nutritious yet dirt-cheap foodstuff, as a way of crawling around government cash limits.

But even while some general managers rub their hands in delight at the possible cash savings, new problems are emerging from the woodwork. Animal rights campaigners are already attacking hospitals over the suffering inflicted upon cockroaches; and vegetarians are reportedly joining forces with the powerful butchers' lobby to complain to ministers at the rumoured production of a new NHS recipe book in which cockroaches would replace both the meat and fresh vegetables in the hospital diet.

As Brigadier Stricnesse, New General Manager of the Borassick DHA, told Health Emergency, "People must move with the times. What other food comes free and gives six leg joints with every carcass? If patients don't like it, they should join me in BUPA."



ants' eggs in claret, while many pubs serve the ever-popular "Cockroach in a basket" — otherwise known as "scampi".

With the cuts in NHS domestic cleaning staff and the privatisation of domestic services producing an ever-increasing "in-house" supply of fresh and fattened