But as the son of a nurse, he does already hold views on the nursing profession. He sees improving the qualifications of nurses as fundamental to improving care overall.

Mr Lamb says a modern health system requires new technical skills, so it is essential for nursing to move in that direction. ‘At the same time, I am sure every nurse takes the view that the human skills of caring and supporting goes with that. I am sure that every good nurse completely understands how this is central to his or her role.’

Mr Lamb hopes to build working relationships with both supporters and opponents of the NHS reforms outlined in the Health and Social Care Act.

‘Even the most diehard opponents of the reforms would agree, in the cool light of day, that the important thing for everyone who believes in the NHS is to make this work – and that is going to be my task,’ he says.

Within days of arriving at the Department of Health, Mr Lamb began arranging a round-table conference aimed at promoting better integration, not only between health and social care services, but also between primary and secondary care.

At a time when no government can simply throw money at problems, he argues new ways are needed to improve care with available resources.

Tapping into talent
But it is also about finding ways of making the best use of professional talents and experience, he says.

‘I want to create a vision of a health service that NHS staff will want to sign up to – something achievable that will help the NHS sustain itself and make it the envy of the world.

‘I want people who can help deliver my ambition of integrated care. Every leading nation in health quality terms is shifting the focus towards integrated care, with the principle that you put the patient at centre stage.

‘Let us get around the table all the people who have something to offer on that – people who can help in a practical way to deliver integrated care. That is my ambition’ NS

WILL THE GOVERNMENT RESHUFFLE SIGNAL A BRIGHTER NHS FUTURE?

Jennifer Sprinks asks nursing unions what they think of the coalition government’s performance so far

The appointment of Jeremy Hunt as health secretary marks not only the end of Andrew Lansley’s tenure, but also the halfway point of the coalition government’s term in office.

Two and a half years since the general election, Nursing Standard asked health unions to reflect on this government’s management of the NHS so far, and consider what lies in store for nursing.

Since the coalition came into power, NHS nurses have faced unprecedented change, but unions fear there is worse to come.

RCN senior parliamentary officer Laurence Meehan says the biggest driver behind the challenges faced to date has been the pressure on the NHS to save £20 billion.

Mr Meehan anticipates that the government’s comprehensive spending review will result in further financial restraint. This is despite the coalition pledge for a 0.4 per cent increase in NHS spending in real terms over four years. ‘The savings drive will get worse because the government will be under an even tighter funding squeeze,’ he says.

He believes this government will be remembered most for the way it pushed through the Health and Social Care Act despite widespread opposition from healthcare professionals.

Unite head of health Rachael Maskell fears the ‘end goal’ of the act is to replace the NHS. ‘We have a crumbling health service and organisations are trying to cut staff pay, terms and conditions. My fear is that we are heading towards a private insurance market.’

Her fear is compounded by the fact that Mr Hunt co-authored a pamphlet in 2005 called Direct Democracy, in which he called for the NHS to be denationalised and replaced with a national insurance model.

Another concern for Ms Maskell is the downgrading of many nurses working at bands 7 and 8. ‘We are losing a lot of expertise at higher grades,’ she says. ‘That approach is short-sighted – when it comes to making appointments in the future, we will not get people with the same level of expertise.’

Unison head of nursing Gail Adams believes the government has had a detrimental effect on the nursing profession. ‘Nurses are probably the most demoralised I have seen them for some years,’ she says.

‘MY FEAR IS THAT WE ARE HEADING FOR A PRIVATE INSURANCE MARKET’

The government says it is committed to improving nursing. In January, prime minister David Cameron launched the nursing and care quality forum in a bid to seek nurse leaders’ views on how to improve quality in the NHS.

Ms Adams says the forum could have a positive impact, providing its recommendations are free from political interference.

A Department of Health spokesperson told Nursing Standard that the coalition government has made a number of positive contributions to the profession, including its commitment to recruit an extra 4,200 health visitors by 2015.

The unions concede that point, but are concerned that the recruitment drive has led to nurses being poached from areas such as school nursing.

Ms Adams says she would like the new ministers to ‘roll up their sleeves’ and shadow nurses’ work. ‘I want the new ministers to know what it is really like for the profession.’