Labour proposes single budget and integration of health and social care

By Jennifer Sprinks in Manchester

The way hospitals are financed could be overhauled and the NHS expanded to provide social care if Labour was returned to government, shadow health secretary Andy Burnham has indicated.

Speaking at the Labour Party annual conference in Manchester last week, Mr Burnham said the current payment system, introduced by Labour, does not act as enough of an incentive for NHS acute trusts to keep patients out of hospital.

‘The sadness is hospitals are paid by how many older people they admit, not by how many they keep out,’ he said.

‘If we do not change that, we will not deliver the care people need in an era when there is less money around.’

Mr Burnham favours pooling health and social care funding into a single budget, as happens in Northern Ireland.

‘We can get better results for people if we think of one system caring for the whole person – with councils and the NHS working closely together.

‘All options should be considered, including full integration of health and social care,’ he added.

Speaking at a health debate earlier in the week, Mr Burnham said councils could take the lead in commissioning care from acute providers who, in turn, would increasingly provide services in the community. During his speech, he referred to the time he spent shadowing a nurse at the Royal Derby Hospital. She had told him that frail older people are often in hospitals that had been designed in a different age.

Sketchy details

Mr Burnham received three standing ovations during his speech. Delegates cheered when he criticised the coalition’s health reforms and said that moves to privatised the NHS would lead to ‘fragmentation’.

RCN head of policy Howard Catton said that there may be broad support for some of Mr Burnham’s ideas, but added: ‘We would need to see the hard-nosed details of what is actually being proposed.’

He also questioned how pooling health and social care budgets would work in practice.

Chris Ham, head of the health think tank the King’s Fund, welcomed the emphasis on integrated health and social care but described the detail as ‘sketchy’ and requiring further structural change.

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Conference notes

A round-up of the news and views coming out of Manchester last week

During a debate on the future of health and social care, Royal College of Midwives general secretary Cathy Warwick criticised the government’s view that increased patient choice will bolster care.

She said: ‘The middle classes will push to get the best at the expense of others. We should be concentrating not on individual choice and control, but on ensuring everyone is able to access high quality services.’

A Labour government would introduce minimum pricing for alcoholic drinks. Speaking at a fringe event on tackling the UK’s drinking culture, shadow minister for public health Diane Abbott, who will lead a policy review on health this autumn, said: ‘There is no question in my mind that price has to be part of the mix.’

The Scottish Government plans to set a minimum price of 50p per unit in an attempt to reduce levels of alcohol consumption.

Nurses should not be ‘defensive’ about involving families and carers in helping patients to eat, according to RCN general secretary Peter Carter.

Speaking at an RCN fringe event, he said encouraging family and carers to help patients at mealtimes would be one way of helping to free up nurses’ time.