Hopes and fears for the future of the NHS

Why, despite recent announcements, I do not trust this government to deliver on health and social care

Following the Cabinet reshuffle in January, the Department of Health was rebranded as the Department of Health and Social Care, with Jeremy Hunt MP still at the helm.

Our health and social care system is failing to meet the needs of older people who are living longer with complex and multiple co-morbidities, so Mr Hunt’s extended remit offers a unique opportunity to integrate services.

The forthcoming green paper on social care promises to set out how the government proposes to improve long-term care and support for older people. It is therefore important to anyone concerned with this vulnerable and frail population. But while I am ever hopeful for improvements to services, I fear we still have a long road to travel before we arrive at individualised, comprehensive, streamlined and affordable health and social care services for older people.

Ahead of a public consultation to take place when the green paper is published in the summer, the government has invited the advice of independent experts.

I am encouraged by the inclusion among them of British Geriatrics Society president and geriatrician Eileen Burns. However, other than chief executive officers of charities and carers’ organisations, there appears to be an absence of people invited with first-hand experience of health and social care services. I fear that if any are included, it will be a token gesture.

The government says its proposals will ‘build on the additional £2 billion over the next three years that it has already provided to meet social care needs and reduce pressures on NHS services’.

I fear there is an attempt to dismantle a publicly funded NHS, and that unpaid, informal carers who must increasingly provide support will bear the burden.

Even if money is made available, the government’s privatisation agenda is clear: see, for example, the recommendations of the Naylor review of NHS property and estates to ‘make best use of the buildings and land’. In other words, to sell it.

I agree with Noam Chomsky: ‘That’s the standard technique of privatization: defund, make sure things don’t work, hand it over to private capital.’

Radical reform

I hope for widespread integration, not only of health and social care. I hope for radical reforms in education, housing and employment. There is an urgent need to address underlying social inequalities, but sadly that is outside the remit of the green paper.

I am neither confident of, nor optimistic about, Mr Hunt’s stated commitment to reforming social care. His judgement on ‘getting it right’ for a growing ageing population could fall well short of the reasonable expectations of the public to receive quality care, and those of health and social care professionals to be able to deliver it.

Judging by the enraged tweets being directed at Mr Hunt, many ordinary people fear the government is out of touch with their needs. This demonstrable and parlous lack of leadership fills me with little confidence.

State-provided long-term care costs money, but it also creates jobs and makes for a better and fairer society for all. I do not trust this government to deliver on the social care green paper, or indeed healthcare in general.