

Thousands demonstrate to save children's heart surgery in Leeds

Our reporters
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Some 3,000 people gathered in Millennium Square, Leeds on July 23 to protest the proposal to end paediatric heart surgery at Leeds General Infirmary.

A decision to close three paediatric heart hospital units was made in early July following a National Health Services (NHS) "Safe and Sustainable" Review—at the Royal Brompton in Chelsea, west London, the Leeds General Infirmary, and Glenfield Hospital in Leicester. Seven heart units will remain—two in London and one each in Southampton, Liverpool, Birmingham, Bristol and Newcastle.

The Royal Brompton is the largest specialist heart and lung centre in the UK and one of the largest centres in Europe, performing more than 400 surgeries a year. The Leeds General Infirmary serves 5.5 million residents in West Yorkshire and Humberside and has three surgeons performing 360 operations a year. Glenfield Hospital in Leicester conducts nearly 250 child heart surgeries each year and provides services for more than five million people in eastern England.

It is estimated that there are more than 4,600 babies born with congenital heart disease in the UK each year.

An 18-month-long petition campaign opposing the removal of children's heart surgery from Leeds hospital has collected around 600,000 signatures.

Campaigners at the Leeds demonstration made the point that the closure of the unit would leave a population of 14 million people having to travel from Yorkshire and Lincolnshire to Newcastle, Liverpool and Birmingham for treatment.

Some demonstrators carried banners and signs reading "SOS Save Our Surgery" and "Don't Break

My Heart", as they followed a march around Leeds city centre. A group of nurses carried a banner which read, "467 years of combined cardiac nursing experience lost."

Sharon Cheng, director of the Children's Heart Surgery Fund, told the rally that she wasn't opposed to the review, but that its findings were wrong.

"We feel we are being ignored. 600,000 people signed a petition against the closure who believed our logical argument that we have a safe and sustainable facility right here in Leeds. Here in Yorkshire we have a growing population. Facilities should be based where patients are."

No appeal was made for a joint campaign to save all facilities under threat and to reject the politically motivated austerity argument.

Joe Barry, a young former patient spoke to say, "Without care from Leeds, I wouldn't be here."

Louise Gillard, a young woman who has had a heart problem since birth and been operated on several times, told the *World Socialist Web Site*, "I still see the paediatric cardiac surgeons and if the children's heart surgery goes, we grown-ups will lose our surgical team as well."

"My last operation was an emergency. They had me in surgery within two hours. There would not have been time for me to go anywhere else. If that happens again, I am in trouble. I will always be under threat. What I have is very unstable and so rare. I am the only patient to have had it here so only my team know me. I do not know what the future is."

Speaking of the critical time and the distance she will have to travel, Louise explained, “Being transported, then being admitted into hospital will take a lot longer than that [2 hours].”

The air ambulance is also facing cuts and that impacts on patients needing emergency care.

Asked what she thought was behind the decision of the Joint Committee of Primary Care Trusts (JCPCT) to commission children’s heart surgery from Newcastle and not Leeds in the future, Louise said, “It’s my personal opinion that the people on the committee can’t come up with good reasons. They claim to be able to change our minds about travelling, even though 75 percent of those asked about it were against it. I can’t see how this is going to save money. It will cost the patients and family a lot more money. We will be in hospital a lot longer, which will cost the NHS [National Health Service] a lot of money.”

Anna Goldsten, from Halifax, was at the rally with her 2-year-old son Alfie, who was born at the Leeds hospital. Alfie suffers from a number of heart problems and is in danger of having convulsions. She said, “His heart will never work properly. He has undergone two lots of heart surgery, both performed at Leeds. ... Alfie is due to have more surgery to keep him alive.

“I had my son here, I was able to visit him from the maternity ward to the heart ward. If I was at Liverpool, I wouldn’t have been able to do that. He would be hours without his mum.”

Of the future Anna explained, “They just give him procedures that keep him alive, to keep his heart working up to the point when it will give out and he will need a transplant.”

Speaking with emotion about the staff, Anna said, “They have been so supportive; it has been such a hard time. They know the children and the children know the staff. He has been here since the day he was born.

All the nurses know what we have been through. It is a personal service as much as anything else. The surgeons perform 120 operations each. They are amazing.”

Criticising the JCPCT, she said, “We have been given no patient choice, as human beings. ... They have taken all that away from us.”

Lisa, who works as a cleaner at a local Leeds health care surgery, said, “I think it’s diabolical, all these kids needing heart surgery and having to traipse miles and miles. I was appalled and I speak on behalf of my friends and family and co-workers.”

Speaking of the bank bailout with public money following the economic crash of 2008, Lisa said, “I can’t understand why you’d want to put bailing out the banks before a child. What is more important?”



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