

British NHS watchdog promotes privatisation

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The report that the UK's National Health Service (NHS) watchdog, the Care Quality Commission (CQC), suppressed one of its own investigative reports is the latest scandal to hit the organisation, whose supposed aim is to protect health and social care standards.

The independent report, commissioned by the CQC, by management consultants Grant Thornton accused the regulator "of quashing an internal review that uncovered weaknesses in its processes". This related to an investigation at the maternity unit at Furness General Hospital in Cumbria, England, part of the Morecambe Bay NHS Trust, that included the deaths of 14 babies, two mothers and nine infants born with permanent brain damage.

Joshua Titcombe died in October 2008, only nine days old, but an inquest showed he could have been saved if antibiotics had been given to treat his lung infection. Joshua's father, James, led the campaign for a public inquiry into "serious systemic failures" at the University Hospitals of Morecambe Bay Trust.

Nittaya Hendrickson died following a complication as a result of fluid from her womb entering her bloodstream, and her son Chester died from fatal brain damage. Nittaya's husband alleged that heart monitor records that had gone missing would have shown that a caesarean operation should have been performed much earlier than it was.

An inquest blamed lack of co-operation between midwives and doctors for the death of Alex Brady, as a result of the umbilical cord being wrapped around his neck in September 2008.

The report also alleged that a senior CQC manager had told a CQC employee "to destroy his review because it would expose the regulator to public criticism." Initially, the CQC refused to name the staff involved in the alleged cover-up but, following media pressure, relented the next day and released their

names.

It was also revealed that a second damaging report into the investigations at the Morecambe Bay NHS Trust, carried out by consultants Deloitte, was also quietly published on the CQC website in January without any press release as is usual in such circumstances or notifications to those involved in the case.

The terrible tragedy at Furness General Hospital and the callous cover-up that followed cannot simply be heaped on the individuals involved, as the media and politicians have done, but must involve an examination of successive government policies.

Set up in 2009 by the previous Labour Party government as an independent regulator, CQC has been subject to political pressure and manipulation by both the Labour government and the current Conservative/Liberal coalition government. It has been an integral part of the plans by both governments to open up the health service to privatisation, and to provide a cover for the numerous scandals that have occurred in the NHS and privately run care facilities, as a result of the search for profit.

A June 22 *Daily Telegraph* article alleges Roger Davidson, head of media and public affairs at the CQC, was sacked prior to the 2010 general election after he said "a quarter of NHS trusts failed to meet basic hygiene standards." According to Davidson, the CQC's "message that 'we don't want bad news' infected the whole organisation."

In 2009, University of London professor of public health research and policy Allyson Pollock, at Queen Mary, University of London, warned, "hospitals and trusts are given a single index of 'fair', 'good', 'excellent' or 'weak' based on a medley of 84 composite measures...it does not provide a basis for NHS planning and health service development...market reforms have been accompanied by a hollowing out of

the intelligent public health information that is required for healthcare planning and ensuring fairness of distribution of resources...the CQC performance indicators tell us nothing about need and fairness of access for the whole population.”

In the decade running up to March 2010, the Morecambe Bay NHS Trust was trying to convert to “Foundation Trust” status. This was being demanded the then-Labour government as a key step in the privatisation process. Foundation Trusts were given the autonomy to redesign NHS services for the private sector, or franchise them out. Since its conversion, Morecambe Bay NHS Foundation Trust has acquired a massive £16 million deficit and been under continuous pressure to cut services.

It is alleged that then-Labour Party health secretary Andy Burnham and Andrew Lansley, his coalition government successor until September 2012, both pressed for hospitals to be given clean bills of health in order to speed through the foundation trust process. A whistleblower within the CQC said this week that she had contacted Lansley about her concerns in March 2012.

In the CQC’s case, it had been found wanting in other incidents. In November 2009, a report leaked to the media highlighted poor standards at the Basildon and Thurrock University Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust. It revealed “hundreds of people had died needlessly due to appalling standards of care”. Yet, the previous month, a CQC report had rated the hospital’s performance as good. As a result of the exposure, the then-CQC chair, Barbara Young, resigned.

In 2011, the BBC Panorama current affairs programme showed undercover film of people with learning disabilities being mistreated at the Winterbourne View private hospital near Bristol after being contacted by a former charge nurse, Terry Bryan. As a result, 10 employees were arrested and taken to court and the home closed down, while the business tycoons who raked in tens of millions of pounds over several years at the expense of patients and workers remained unpunished. Prior to contacting the BBC, Bryan had contacted the CQC, but his concerns were ignored.

In April 2012, another BBC Panorama exposure using hidden cameras revealed the abuse of an 81 year woman suffering from Alzheimer’s disease at the

privately run Ash Court Centre in Kentish Town, London. One person was sent to prison and another four were sacked.

Unannounced visits by the CQC the previous October had failed to pick up any concerns and had given it the highest recommendation of three stars. The response of the CQC to the exposure was to state they “should not be criticised for failing to protect people from harm...which often takes place behind closed doors.”

Recent appointments to the CQC board show it is anxious to maintain close links with those having a vested interest in supporting the opening up of the health service to rationalisation and privatisation. They include Paul Corrigan, who was former health policy advisor to ex-Labour prime minister Tony Blair and a former special advisor to health ministers Alan Milburn and John Reid; Michael Mire, who had worked for business consultancy firm McKinsey and Company for more than 30 years; and Camilla Cavendish, a journalist who had also been an analyst at McKinsey.

McKinsey and Company are the largest private health consultants that have been hired by successive UK governments to carry through rationalisation and prepare privatisations plans for the NHS.

The latest revelations further disprove the claim that the ailing social and health care system can be revived through “regulatory measures”, administered by governments, set on the privatisation of public health care.

Current health minister Jeremy Hunt is calling for a “culture change”, stating that he would back the CQC “absolutely to the hilt” if it chose to take action against individuals responsible. This is a desperate attempt to deflect responsibility for the crisis away from his government and the previous Labour one, whose policies have paved the way for far greater tragedies than even that which occurred at Furness General Hospital.



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