

Wales: Hospital waiting times double

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Latest figures from the National Health Service in Wales (Welsh NHS) reveal that the number of patients having to wait over nine months for hospital treatment has more than doubled—from 5,414 to 11,672—in the last six months. Only 88.4 percent were seen within 26 weeks—well below the 95 percent target figure.

In response to public opposition to the crisis in the health service, Jane Hutt, finance minister in the Labour Party minority-run Welsh Assembly, announced a new budget last month in which NHS Wales is set to get an extra £570 million over the next three years.

Labour's highlighting of the relatively small increase—1.7 percent in real terms—of funding for the NHS was to veil the continued attacks on other public services. At the same time local government is set to have an almost 6 percent real cut in funding—some £175 million.

The increase in funding to NHS Wales will in any case barely touch the surface of the mounting crisis across all areas of health care in Wales. The new figures also highlight that in the month of September the number of people waiting less than four hours in Accident and Emergency (A&E) departments was five percent below the government target, while 802 people were left waiting for over 12 hours. This is despite a fall of more than 4,000 attendances to A&E departments between August and September.

Over a period of 16 months, the ambulance service failed to hit the target of answering 65 percent of life-endangered calls within the targeted eight minutes, while a phenomenal 95 percent of urgent cancer patients go without treatment within 62 days of their initial diagnosis.

Figures also show that in 2012 the number of hospital beds in Wales fell by 313 to 11,495. Over the past 10 years, the number has fallen by nearly 20 percent.

The decrease has been blamed for helping to bring A&E department to the verge of what consultants

described as “meltdown” last winter. Some 2,600 non-emergency operations had to be postponed in the first three months of this year because of bed shortages.

Dr. Phil Banfield, chair of the British Medical Association's Welsh council, said, “This is of great concern to our members... There have been too many beds cut. We are getting reports that this is not about winter—this is about now. Several hospitals are already cutting operations and we're not even into winter. In principle, we would encourage patients to be treated in the community, but the support services need to be there, otherwise the ability to admit patients becomes compromised.”

Last year's experience is likely to be repeated with Health Minister Mark Drakeford warning that the pressure on health services will be “real and inescapable” this winter, before claiming that health boards were putting in precautions to prevent a repeat. An example of one such precaution was the announcement this month by Hywel Dda Health Board, which provides services to 370,000 people in west Wales, that it is proposing to cancel some elective procedures such as hip and knee operations during the winter.

The paltry increase in the NHS Wales budget is more than offset by the reduction in other local services. In addition, cuts to local council care services could place additional demands on the health service.

The first services predicted to fall under the new budget include libraries, museums and street lighting. While Hutt continued to make hollow apologies for the cuts to local government, claiming that it would be impossible to “shield” all services from the austerity measures, Leanne Wood, of the nationalist Plaid Cymru claimed that the budget, which her party and the Liberal Democrats worked with Labour on, would secure help for “people in the short term—a deal that will make a practical difference to peoples' lives, now, today.”

The trade unions are lining up to prevent opposition developing to the cuts. Public sector union, Unison Cymru/Wales, claims the budget is “responsible” and states that “we want to work with the Welsh government and employers to cushion the blow to the public as much as possible.”

The union’s defence of the austerity measures being implemented by the minority Labour government, with the assistance of Plaid Cymru and the Liberal Democrats, highlights their naked apologetics for the continued ravaging of public services.

While the trade unions talk of “cushioning the blow”, in reality they have overseen three years of pay freezes for public sector workers in Wales and throughout the UK, reducing real pay by 13 percent, and slashing pensions. Some 17,000 public sector workers in Wales have lost their jobs.



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