

Millions face dire consequences of rundown of Britain's National Health Service

Robert Stevens
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Prime Minister Theresa May and Conservative ministers have spent the last week denying that the National Health Service (NHS) is in an enormous crisis.

Last weekend, two patients at Worcestershire Royal Hospital died after waiting hours for treatment in hospital corridors. At the same time, more than 20 hospitals raised alerts that they could no longer provide basic services to the public. In response, the British Red Cross said, accurately, that the NHS was facing a “humanitarian crisis.”

At Prime Minister's Questions Wednesday, May said the depiction used by the Red Cross was “irresponsible and overblown” and claimed that the NHS was receiving £10 billion more funding from the government than it had requested.

May was flatly contradicted just two hours later by Simon Stevens, the chief executive of NHS England. Stevens was giving evidence to parliaments' public accounts committee on the “financial sustainability of the NHS,” and said funding was being substantially reduced. “Over the next three years, funding is going to be highly constrained. In 2018-2019, real-terms NHS spending per person in England is going to go down, 10 years after Lehman Brothers [collapsed] and austerity began.” He added, “We all understand why that is, but let's not pretend that's not placing huge pressure on the service.”

Stevens gave his evidence after Chris Hopson—chief executive of NHS Providers—said bluntly in his testimony that, “We have reached the point in the NHS where we can no longer deliver everything that has been asked of the NHS.”

The dire situation in the NHS, which is a life-and-death issue for millions, has been deliberately created by successive government policies.

Stevens, a former adviser to Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair, is no friend of the working class. However, his reference to the austerity agenda enacted after the financial crash of 2008 is a significant admission. In order to enact a £1 trillion bailout of the banks and super-rich, the Labour government began a programme of mass austerity. Central to this was the acceleration of spending cuts to the NHS and the privatisation—to the tune of billions of pounds—of a huge portion of its services, resulting in the present crisis.

In 2009, Stevens' predecessor, David Nicholson, in alliance with the Gordon Brown Labour government, demanded that already struggling NHS Trusts deliver up to £20 billion in “efficiency savings” over three years from 2011 to 2014. This was enforced under the Tory/Liberal Democrat coalition when they came to office in 2010. Following the re-election of the Tories in 2015, a further £22 billion in cuts is being imposed by 2020-2021, again under the euphemism of “efficiency savings.”

As a result of this systematic underfunding, the breakdown of the NHS worsens by the day. On Tuesday, figures leaked from NHS Improvement, an NHS regulator in England, to the BBC revealed that nearly a quarter of patients waited longer than four hours in Accident and Emergency (A&E) departments last week. In one hospital, Weston Area, 44 percent waited more than four hours. The document revealed dangerously high levels of bed occupancy. In England 94.7 percent of beds are full, a figure well above the “safe” threshold of 85 percent.

Those admitted to hospital as emergency cases face long, and as the Worcestershire deaths demonstrate, dangerous, waiting times for a bed—in some instances well over 48 hours. In the first week of January, more than 18,000 people had “trolley waits” in corridors of

four hours or more and 485 people had to lie on trolleys for more than 12 hours—treble the number seen during the whole of January last year.

On Friday, the *Daily Mirror* ran a front-page picture of a 22-month-old boy—with suspected meningitis—who had to lie in a waiting room for five hours on two plastic chairs pulled together as a makeshift bed by his mother due to a lack of beds at a hospital.

The boy's mother, Rose Newman, said, "Theresa May said she accepted there had been a few instances where things like this happen. That is laughable. In that waiting room, there was a woman sitting opposite me, head in hands, I don't know what had happened to her but she had been there for eight hours. Another baby, younger than Jack [her son], had a big rash across her, had to be put on a drip, and they'd been waiting more than six hours."

Members of the Royal College of Nursing (RCN) reported this week that the situation in the NHS is the worst they have known. One nurse in charge of a major treatment centre in A&E, told the RCN, "At one point our treatment area, meant for 20 patients, had 56 patients crowded in corridors and around the nursing station." Janet Davies, the RCN's chief executive, said nurses were told to discharge people from hospital even though they were unfit to leave in order to free up beds.

Another professional body, the Royal College of Physicians (RCP), demand the government provide funding urgently to help "over-full hospitals with too few qualified staff." RCP President Professor Jane Dacre said, "Our members fear that patients' lives are at risk because they can't get round to see patients who aren't in the emergency and accident department or are waiting for results to come back."

The Royal College of Radiologists also demanded more funding and "immediate and longer-term measures to address the issues."

Central to the crisis is the mass culling of staff. According to a report issued last April by the NHS's Health and Social Care Information Centre, the NHS had 69,317 fewer staff than was being reported by the government, including just over 15,000 fewer nurses, midwives and health visitors and 3,000 fewer doctors. According to recent figures, there are 6,000 fewer nurses and 400 fewer doctors working in mental health.

At Prime Minister's Questions, Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn focussed on the NHS crisis in his allotted

questions. While Corbyn addressed the lengthy waiting times and other aspects of the crisis, he said nothing about its origins and proposed nothing beyond the government bringing forward £900 million of funding due to reach the NHS by 2019. This amount is a mere drop in the ocean compared to the vast resources being stripped from the NHS and the profits reaped by the privateers.

Moreover, Labour played a central role, as indicated by Stevens, in laying the basis for today's crisis.

There have been repeated warnings about this state of affairs. Last year, 50,000 junior doctors mounted a wave of unprecedented strikes to protest the government plan to enforce an inferior contract on them. In the face of relentless and hostile propaganda from the government and right-wing media, the junior doctors warned that the contract was bound up with accelerating efforts to destroy the NHS. For that, they won widespread public support.

Corbyn, in alliance with the trade unions, played a major role in the isolation and eventual defeat of the junior doctors. After first studiously ignoring the strikes, Corbyn belatedly made a face-saving appearance at a picket line in April, while calling for the government to reach a negotiated settlement with the British Medical Association (BMA)

This allowed the government the time required to concoct a dirty deal with the BMA—on whose junior doctors committee Corbyn supporters have leading positions—out of which the inferior contract demanded by the Tories was enforced last December.

Public health care is a social right, not a privilege, and the working class must begin to organise a counteroffensive against the scorched earth programme of the ruling elite aimed at destroying the NHS. In 2012, the Socialist Equality Party launched the NHS FightBack campaign to lead this struggle, insisting that a fight back can be successful only if it is waged independently of Labour and the trade unions and on the basis of a socialist programme.

For further information, contact NHS FightBack.



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