

NHS waiting list crisis offers bonanza for private companies

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National Health Service waiting lists for elective procedures could rise to more than 14 million by autumn 2022 in the worst-case scenario, and up to 9 million in the most optimistic scenario.

This warning by the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) follows Conservative Health and Social Care Secretary Sajid Javid stating that hospital waiting lists will increase up to 13 million in the coming months.

The fate of millions of people waiting to have an operation is an indictment of the Tory government and the ruling elite. They have let the COVID-19 pandemic run rampant, bringing an already dilapidated NHS to breaking point.

Many hospital trusts and ambulance services are still functioning under enormous pressure and working with reduced capacity. But operating on the maxim of “never let a good crisis go to waste”, the government has called on private hospital groups to step in and provide elective treatment. These private hospitals are set to rake in £200 million profit by providing elective procedures and diagnostic facilities to NHS patients.

Years of underfunding, reduced bed capacity and staff shortages even before the coronavirus pandemic hit saw 4.4 million patients on hospital waiting lists. Over the last year, the waiting list has grown by 900,000 to 5.3 million.

But millions more have not joined queues because of disruption to hospital appointments, GP appointments and consultant referrals during the pandemic. According to IFS researchers, “in the first 10 months of the pandemic, there were 3 million fewer elective admissions and 17 million fewer outpatient appointments than in the same period the previous year.” They point out that “since March 2020, 7.4 million fewer people have joined the waiting list than implied by pre-pandemic patterns.”

In one scenario, the IFS estimates that even if 80 percent of patients needing hospital care join waiting lists in the coming period, “waiting lists would soar to 14 million by the autumn of 2022 and then continue to climb, as the number joining the waiting list exceeds the number being treated.”

Patients waiting for more than a year to be treated stood at 336,000 by May this year, compared to 1,600 in February 2020. NHS England figures show that in May, 212,770 patients had waited more than six months for trauma and orthopaedic services while another 130,224 patients who needed eye treatment services faced a similar plight. Hundreds of thousands with heart, gynaecology, urology and other ailments had also waited more than six months.

Many of these patients, including those with cancer and heart conditions, will die or face devastating suffering without timely intervention and treatment. Those who can afford to will be forced to fund treatments themselves, selling homes, exhausting savings and incurring crippling debts while the government washes its hands of any responsibility.

ITV News recently reported the case of 29-year-old mother Emma Jamieson, who was forced to seek private treatment for her endometriosis. She struggled for four years to get a diagnosis, only to be told she would have to wait another two years for treatment on the NHS. Unable to bear the daily pain she took out a £10,000 personal loan and started a Go Fund Me page to raise the additional funds to pay £14,000 for her hysterectomy operation. Thousands more across the country face a similarly desperate plight.

Among those joining waiting lists are patients with Long COVID. By the beginning of March 2021, over a million people in the UK were reporting symptoms associated with Long COVID, according to the Office

of National Statistics. A massive 40 percent of COVID sufferers aged between 19 and 49 had developed problems with their kidneys, lungs or other organs while being treated, according to a study by university researchers, the Department of Health and Social Care and Public Health England.

The burden imposed on the NHS by the criminal “herd immunity” policy of the ruling elite is unprecedented. Prime Minister Boris Johnson’s government has lifted all measures aimed at controlling the virus—including mask-wearing and social-distancing—amid average COVID-19 cases of more than 28,000 in the last seven days. Nearly 6,000 patients are being treated in hospitals nationally.

Hospitals are operating at 95 percent capacity, although safe capacity is 85 percent. This is even before winter pressures of flu and other ailments kicks in. Last month, the Academy of Medical Sciences warned, “A lethal triple mix of COVID-19, influenza, and the respiratory virus Respiratory Syncytial Virus (RSV), could push an already depleted NHS to breaking point this winter unless we act now.”

In a recent interview with the *Bournemouth Daily Echo*, Chief Executive of the University Hospitals Dorset (UHD) Debbie Fleming admitted that Bournemouth and Poole Hospitals were already “really heaving” and “bracing for a perfect storm of pressures”. She said the past 18 months had taken its toll and staff were “knackered”.

“This summer already feels very different not least because of the pent-up demand we are experiencing. We are unlikely to be able to draw breath before the winter arrives,” she told the *Daily Echo*.

According to a nurse in the UHD Trust, 37 patients with COVID-19 were being treated, including five patients in Intensive Care Units as of last Friday, while 140 staff members were absent due to COVID-19 symptoms, isolating and shielding. Waiting lists for elective surgeries at the UHD Trust have climbed to 49,000, with 1,410 patients waiting a year-and-a-half for their elective procedures and 3,449 patients have waited more than a year.

Hospitals across the country are operating with 12 percent less bed capacity as they try to prevent COVID-19 cross infections between patients. Since 1987, successive Labour and Tory-led governments have slashed bed capacity by two thirds to 118,000 in

2020. They are responsible for chronic staff shortages of more than 110,000 health professionals, including 50,000 nurses.

While engaging in the cynical “Clap for our NHS Heroes,” the ruling elite has put health workers through an unending nightmare. Numerous reports from NHS frontline workers and public health experts have pointed to staff burnout caused by repeated waves of COVID-19, massive workloads and attacks on pay, terms and conditions.

But this catastrophic situation has opened a new goldmine for the ruling elite to plunder and privatise the NHS. The Tory government has plans to sign another £2 billion worth of contracts with private hospital firms to create around 7,000 extra beds. Contracts worth more than £2 billion have already been offered to companies since March 2020 to create extra bed capacity and provide non-urgent care. The *iNews* wrote, “Private hospital groups such as Circle Health, Ramsay Health Care and Spire Healthcare are believed to be among those discussing new and expanded deals with the Department for Health and Social Care.”

“Cost plus” pricing formulas in these contracts allow private companies to claim 8 to 10 percent of profits from the government, refuting NHS England’s argument that these contracts would be “at the same cost to taxpayers.”



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