



SARAH WOLLASTON

Totnes MP Sarah Wollaston explains the significance of the Government's rethink on the NHS

NHS? The government has listened

ON MARCH 16 I tabled an amendment calling on the Government to listen to the concerns of patients, professional bodies and independent experts and work with them to achieve a strengthened NHS.

I wanted to make sure that the future direction of our NHS achieved real consensus rather than carried on regardless of some of the concerns expressed about issues such as the place of competition within the NHS and the make-up of GP commissioning boards.

I would far rather be part of a Government that is prepared to pause and listen than one that accelerates past the warning signs. That it not only listened but then accepted the recommendations of the 'Future Forum' is good news for patients and the NHS.

The changes will address the issue at the heart of the concerns expressed, namely the place of competition in the NHS. Many people were worried that unrestricted competition could have the potential to divert funding away from NHS hospitals which could then in turn become financially unviable. There was also worry that commissioners would be swamped by legal challenges from private companies, mirroring the NHS in more bureaucracy. There is now a clear commitment to put in place safeguards covering the economic regulator, 'monitor', and spell out that competition should be used only



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when it will improve the quality of services and not as an end in itself.

Equally, it will end the unfair advantage that was given to many private providers under Labour thus

ensuring that the private sector cannot be favoured over the NHS.

On the other side of this is the argument that the NHS does not always provide the kind of service that people want and there have

been many examples of organisations that can really add value to patients. Think of Cool Recovery in Torbay. Why not allow the commissioners to spend money on services provided by other groups

where there is clear evidence that patients prefer it? We should not be dogmatic in my view. Choice is great but for those in Devon, choice of where to have treatment is mostly decided by location and how easy it is to travel there. What really matters is the ability to be fully involved and have a choice of treatments when you get there.

Another key change will be that GPs will no longer be solely in the driving seat. Our local commissioners Bay-wide have already recognised the need to involve other professions in decision making but this will now be written into the Bill and commissioners renamed Clinical Commissioning Groups. They will formally have to take greater notice of public concerns and patient groups.

Recognising the success of Torbay in linking health and social care, the Bill will also make it a key duty to promote this way of working together, trying to break down barriers and create a more seamless journey through the NHS.

The other concern was that the NHS needs to be far more open so that people can see how and why decisions are made. For that reason, Clinical Commissioning Groups and Hospital Trust will now have to hold their board meetings in public. We will be able to see where the money is spent as well as challenge these organisations when they are not providing good value for money or poor service.

Many people ask me whether their own doctor should have to spend time on commissioning services and say they want doctors to be doctors. The fact is that only those who are interested will have to be involved in the real nuts and bolts of this work and those doctors who want to stay full time seeing patients can continue to do so. Their practices will have to be members of commissioning groups because one very important aspect of these reforms is going to be the ability to hold practices to account where patients are not receiving good quality care. Bad doctors don't like having their own practice compared with others but this has been shown to be a good way of making sure that they adapt the way they work.

Finally, there has been recognition of the importance of post-graduate degrees which are vital for the ongoing training of doctors. They will continue their important role and much more consideration will be given to how we stop the uneven quality of ongoing training for all our health professionals.

I am convinced that the changes recommended and accepted by the Government will improve the Health and Social Care Bill but I am keen to hear your views.



■ FLASHBACK: Princess Anne visiting the Cool Recovery Project in Torbay in June 2007 – seen as a successful link between health and social care

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