

Ross Pritchard Memorial Fund – Essay Competition

2015 Subject: *“How should we build the public struggle in defence of the NHS?”*

1,000 words maximum

Few would dispute that our NHS is facing a crisis. Many Trusts are running deficits at the same time as billions of pounds in savings are demanded. Waiting times for emergency care and many treatments are increasing, and the Royal College of Nursing fear future cuts will threaten safe staffing levels. Ever larger chunks of our NHS are being sold off to the lowest bidder, and it's being done in such a way that makes it difficult for campaigns to engage the public in great numbers. Campaigners defending our NHS have yet to find messages which not only bring the public out onto the streets in great numbers, but equally importantly sends them into their MPs office to demand a halt to the wholesale destruction of our NHS which is taking place.

The Private Finance Initiative has proved to be a huge, long-term financial burden and private tender contracts often leave our NHS to pick the (expensive) pieces up when things go wrong. An expanding ageing population places an increasing strain on social care, with our NHS again picking up the pieces when adequate home care isn't available. With privatisations rapidly increasing, we can see not only the cracks appearing in the system but also the levers ready in place to widen them.

Several campaigns are already in place ranging from on-line petitions through to protests on the streets and marches across the country but whilst the public has generally been very supportive, most have maintained a passive role in these campaigns. A possible factor in this is the sheer size and organisational complexity of health services. With annual costs over £100 billion and around 15 million patients treated annually, the numbers are mind-boggling and can be abstract concepts to the lay person.

The wealth of information online detailing the threats to our NHS presents both a problem and an opportunity. Information overload can prevent individuals recognising how they can make a personal difference in such a complex area. Ensuring information is accessible, local and personally relevant to people creates an enormous opportunity to boost public engagement.

Social media has an important role to play in this, but as one weapon from the armoury rather than being the main activity. Social media 'slacktivism' can lead both public and campaigners to judge campaigns a success based on numbers of signatures. Politicians find it very easy to ignore lists of names. Ever increasing numbers of people inside their constituency office lobbying them personally, or outside with a placard, is certain to get their full attention.

Local campaigning work can be greatly strengthened by involving health professionals, including those no longer working within our NHS. The voice of a retired local GP will carry more weight with the public than any number of postings read on social media, and will be more trusted as politically neutral. They also know the system and are better placed than most people to understand complex medical information.

Health unions can play a significant role by assisting retired and retiring members to find and join existing local campaigns, or even develop one with the aid of their local trades council. There are individuals within most communities equipped with the organising skills to run public campaigns, but they may lack detailed subject knowledge. Bringing them together with that expert knowledge in order to target on local issues is key to building local, broad based support. We already see large campaigns organically created whenever a local hospital is earmarked for closure. With better information publicising the impact of cuts and privatisation on local health services, the support and willingness to get involved in the struggle will most surely be there.

While politicians can be pressured by the public they are also relentlessly pressured by private health, who spend millions on lobbying and donations. They spend those millions knowing a highly profitable return can be made. That money ultimately comes from our taxes and could be better spent on patient care. For the privateers, we must turn our most treasured jewel into a poisoned chalice.

Any companies and consortium buying up our NHS should be reminded who it belongs to and made aware there will be consequences if they try to profit from it. The Boycott Workfare campaign demonstrated consumer power can change corporate policies. Repeated demonstrations at their offices damaged ATOS' reputation enough for them to pull out of a DWP contract. These campaigns have shown that government is not the only pressure point and that firms looking to profit from their policies and contracts can feel vulnerable in the face of mass, well organised campaigns.

Unions and other groups which have the resource could help spread information at local level about who these companies are and where they have offices. When they bid for contracts, campaigners in the affected area(s) could then organise public events and leafleting sessions exposing the role they are playing in destroying our NHS.

There are plenty of success stories from both national and local campaigning. New layers of NHS campaigners can learn from these examples and the activists who were involved, and will undoubtedly bring fresh ideas which will add new energy to the movement which must be built.

That a large movement can be built is something that we should have great confidence in. The medical expertise is already there and on the side of our NHS. The organising skills are already there and on the side of our NHS. Most importantly of all, most of the public we are looking to engage were born in an NHS hospital, got a lollipop from an NHS doctor after their first jabs, and have seen themselves, their friends and their family cared for by the NHS whenever they have needed it. The public already supports the NHS – it's up to all of us who care about it to help increase their awareness of the danger it is in, and start public conversations in all our communities about how we can join together to defend it.

