

**P-04-608: Inquiry into the Welsh NHS – Petitioner to the Committee,
15.03.2015**

Reply to Welsh Assembly (15 March 2015)

Petition P-04-608: Inquiry into the Welsh NHS

Petitioner: PJ Vanston

Firstly, many thanks for forwarding the reply to my statement from Mark Drakeford AM, Minister for Health and Social Services.

I would like to comment on some of the points he makes in his letter of 5 February.

Mr Drakeford states that “surveys and patient feedback consistently demonstrate a high level of satisfaction with the NHS in Wales.” Firstly, no health campaigner I know of has ever argued the majority of what goes on in the Welsh NHS is bad, just that it can do much better. Secondly, surveys and feedback methods can often mean that patients are in fact rating their approval of the NHS as an institution, even if they are unhappy with treatment times, for example. However, if Mr Drakeford holds great store by surveys, maybe he could ponder the fact that surveys consistently show that over 70% of Welsh people want to see an inquiry into the Welsh NHS as they believe something is deeply wrong with it – and most of these people are reluctant to sign petitions because of the mistaken belief they represent an attack on the NHS or its staff. Fact: surveys show 7 out of 10 people in Wales would like to see an inquiry.

But Mr Drakeford’s main argument against holding an inquiry (or a review) seems to be about cost – and he yet again makes the false argument that a “penny spent on an inquiry is a penny less for frontline care.” One could use the same argument for any Welsh government expenditure (for example, spending on the Senedd building itself, or the salaries and expenses of AMs, or the Welsh language, or roads, or anything else). The cost of an inquiry therefore need have no effect on patient care, and to claim it would is, frankly, dishonest and scaremongering of the worst kind.

The budget for an inquiry or review could come from the general Welsh government budget – or perhaps even as an additional payment from the UK government. I assume that as Mr Drakeford is so preoccupied with cost, he would agree on the spot to a Welsh NHS inquiry if the Westminster UK government were to offer to pay

for it with additional funding? Governments seem to find a few million (or billion) with great ease to fight exotic faraway wars or to bail out irresponsible banks; surely finding the cash to improve the health service of Wales for future generations merits some financial investment from a government in Cardiff (and London) which purports to serve the people of Wales and have their best interests at heart?

In national terms, £13 million (as cited by Mr Drakeford) for an inquiry/review is not a huge sum if it ensures an ever-improving first class health service for Welsh people in the future. I don't wish to be rude, but perhaps Mr Drakeford's apparent obsession with costs do rather make him appear as a man who knows the cost of everything and the value of nothing. The Welsh people deserve a review/inquiry into their NHS.

Moreover, an NHS inquiry or a review would pay for itself in the long term by creating more efficient systems (and ones which would not need hundreds of millions to be spent on private consultants – which is what the Welsh government does at the moment). It would improve staff morale too, in my opinion.

Mr Drakeford states that “inquiries by their very nature focus on looking back and can hinder any progress with ongoing continuous improvement.” This is a very odd point to make – after all, the entire legal system is based on looking back at evidence for wrong-doing, negligence, error etc, yet that does not make it hinder present and future improvement in law enforcement, surely? But if Mr Drakeford feels inquiries are such a waste of time, maybe he should spend some time with those who fought hard and long for the inquiries into Mid-Staffs, Hillsborough, or the murder of Stephen Lawrence and ask them why they wasted their time and money.

Some further relevant points:

- Around half of Welsh cancer sufferers have to wait more than 6 weeks for tests and scans (a much higher percentage than in England).
- The Royal College of Surgeons has stated that the Welsh NHS is in ‘meltdown’ and merits an investigation.
- Sir Bruce Keogh has stated that 6 Welsh hospitals should be investigated for persistently high mortality rates.

- The Welsh government has, until recently, been cutting NHS spending by 1% a year when all other nations of the UK have been increasing their NHS spending by the same amount.
- The reason Wales has more “bodies charged with ensuring quality and safety standards” is because an outdated post-war structure still exists with 7 regional health boards here, each with different criteria to assess quality and safety (a system that seems hideously inefficient and inconsistent).
- 1400 Welsh patients wait more than a year for hospital treatment at the moment.
- Only 81% of patients are seen within 4 hours of arrival at Welsh A&E departments, compared to 90.2% in England (the target is 95%).
- Welsh ambulance arrival times are the worst in Britain, with some injured people waiting 2 or 3 or more hours before an ambulance arrives (leading many to be taken to hospital in police cars).

There are more – many more – points which can be made about disgracefully long waiting times in Wales for operations and tests, ambulance arrival times, and targets being continually missed in many areas – and by margins much higher than in England when targets are missed there.

I do understand that health services everywhere are under great pressure for multifarious reasons. I would also like to say that I fully support the Welsh NHS and staff within it, and that is why I started my whole campaign for an inquiry or review into our NHS – so any argument that aims to silence all criticism or brand all campaigners as anti-NHS is, frankly, inaccurate and dishonest.

At this point, I would just like to say that I utterly disassociate myself from those health campaigns and campaigners who launch personal, sometimes abusive *ad hominem attacks* on Mr Drakeford or others from the Welsh government – or, indeed, NHS staff and managers. I always play the ball, not the man. I also still have faith that eventually, possibly because of electoral results, the Welsh government will one day commission an inquiry, or at least a review, into the Welsh NHS.

I think it a shame, actually, that the proposed Welsh NHS Commission – (which I cautiously welcomed, and which was at least partly a result of pressure put on the

Welsh government by me and many other health campaigners) – will not now be going ahead. Having said that, the timing was awful, what with a UK election just weeks away and a Welsh Assembly election next year. The suspicion was obviously that this was a Labour attempt to defuse and water down the issue before these elections (it may well have worked fine in 2013 or even 2014, as would an inquiry/review – in the manner of the 2013 Keogh review in England).

I hope that things will improve in the Welsh NHS. However, almost every single set of statistics which are released show the Welsh NHS to be the worst in the UK and getting worse too. To live in a state of denial about that is just plain wrong. An independent review or inquiry would stop this issue being the party political football it has unfortunately now become. I can see no other way forward.

One final question I would like to put to Mr Drakeford – and, indeed, the First Minister – and it's this:

Will you be attending the funerals of all those who die as a direct result of the Welsh government's refusal to commission an inquiry into the Welsh NHS and their failure to fund it adequately?

Many thanks in advance for the opportunity to state my views at this Petitions Committee.

Yours,

PJ Vanston

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