



Coronavirus exposes the dangers of outsourcing in the NHS

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Coronavirus is a wake-up call exposing the failure of the Government's NHS cuts and privatisation policy that can no longer be ignored.

I started my student nurse training in the Whittington Hospital in 1990 as the drive to bring private providers into the NHS accelerated.

I remember a shiny new hospital wing being constructed in the grounds of the hospital that I trained in and nurses were overjoyed when we got an 'upper crust' outlet in our hospital foyer. Little did I know then that the new sandwich outlet would spell the end of the much valued WRVS service and I didn't understand that a PFI would lead to the type of long term financial debt that cripples a hospital and leads to frontline services being cut.

When I started my nurse training, sanitation in a hospital was considered so vitally important the matron took personal responsibility for ensuring a hospital was spotless. These days, private contractors now control almost all cleaning, catering, portering and other ancillary services in our hospitals. They drive down the wages, terms and conditions of the hospital workers who deliver these vital services. Maximising profits is the first and only rule these companies adhere to.

I know as an ex-nurse that patients are vulnerable and they rely on their hospital being a safe place to maximise their chances of recovery. The hospital cleaner is no longer on NHS terms and conditions guaranteeing them wages they can live on and a decent sick pay scheme. When the outsourced cleaner becomes ill and does not receive decent sick pay, they face the stark choice between feeding themselves and their families or risk infecting others by attending work when unwell.

In 2019, NHS contractor Mitie deliberately tried to cut cleaning hours in St George's hospital in south London. Our members organised a campaign to oppose these proposed cuts which would lead to dirty wards and increase the risk of cross infection. These workers on poverty wages are prepared to fight for us all in defending health standards.

Politicians and NHS trusts are fully aware of the disastrous impact of privatisation. It is now time that they acted to end this threat to public health.

GMB Union has raised the issue of cross contamination in the NHS with Health Minister Matt Hancock last year and we have repeatedly raised it with NHS trusts.

These warnings must no longer be ignored. The Government's response - to amend the SSP rules - was forced on them and is totally inadequate. It is in the interests of the public and hospital workers that all NHS services are brought back in house. No more excuses from politicians or NHS contractors. Public health is more important than private profit.

Helen O'Connor was an NHS Nurse for 28 years and is now a GMB Southern Region Organiser

