

What is happening to our NHS?

Public Panel Discussion 12th November 2013

Report by John de Prey



What is happening to our NHS? How have things been? Where are things going and how could things become, given recent changes? These questions were addressed by a panel of experts and a lively audience, many of whom had good and bad experiences and opinions to air, in a public discussion held by Farnham Humanists at South Farnham School on Tuesday 12th November. The Chair, Belinda Schwehr, who has practised as a barrister in the adult social services field, kicked off the evening by quoting the latest of the almost daily headlines critical of the NHS.

The first speaker, Sir Mike Aaronson, Chairman of the Frimley Park NHS Foundation Trust, presented a personal perspective, praising Foundation Trusts because they are free to organise the best ways to deliver services, they are accountable and they can generate a surplus for reinvestment. Because of this, and its consistent management, Frimley Park Hospital is one of the best in the country. He said, on the other hand, “over regulation” makes delivery difficult. Foundation Trusts enable movement away from the compartmental approach such as how health care and social care have different funding, so in hospital patients require means testing to be eligible for social care; therefore some who are ready to leave their hospital bed, in fact can’t.

Sir Mike expressed the opinion that Britain needs a national debate on the cost and scope of the NHS, how it can be accessible, affordable and

appropriate. The debate needs to question whether we should aim for freedom of patient choice within public funding or should aim for a completely marketised service where competition law operates and mergers need to be considered by the competition authority.

Harry Baker, a patient representative who, being 81 and a type 2 diabetic, is familiar with some areas of excellence and some shortcomings of Frimley Park Hospital, gave an example where some staff's lack of language skills had caused a patient great discomfort and stress. Another example given was that because a member of staff was unaware of the Mental Incapacity Act, they had not felt able to restrain a mentally deteriorating patient when she should have been.

Doctor David Brown had, like many other GPs and their union, strongly opposed the Health & Social Care Bill. He said the fledgling commissioning of the Surrey Primary Care Trust (PCT) left him with grave concerns about the management culture that exists in NHS organisations, conflicts of interests in the NHS internal market and the risks of private sector involvement in the provision of NHS care. He said because of financial pressures, within five years many Clinical Commissioning Groups (CCGs) will be bankrupt. (CCGs are groups of General Practices that work together to plan and design local health services in England). The Internal market is eschewed. Trusts cooperate "in good will", but their cooperation is in their own interests. Managing to achieve government targets can be against the interests of patients. Involvement of the private sector introduces concern that they produce profit to satisfy share holders, rather than benefit to patients. One finds patient requirements dropped as being "Not in the Contract" or because targets can't be reached. At present, he said, the NHS is open to corruption; bullying of staff takes place and, although Frimley Park is "best" with respect to indicators, it is not so according to its staff. Belinda Schwehr added that in her experience in Social Care, staff are assessed for their performance within budgets, with the aim of making savings.

Doctor Jane Dempster, a local GP who sits on the local CCG board, gave a history of the board, in particular why Farnham is part of a merged board, and expressed her opinion that it is the best way to bring the voice of the local population and GPs to commissioning decisions and the best opportunity to bring about change and to improve services. Frimley Park Hospital has to deal with 3 CCGs, 3 Medical Health Trusts, 3 Social Services and 3 Community Services. In order that patients need not grapple with that complexity, a Joint Commissioning Forum has been formed round the hospital to speak with one voice and produce one set of commissions.

When asked why GPs are no longer on 24 hour callout, Dr Brown explained that it comes about because of the 2004 GPs Contract, but it does not account for the apparent increase in A&E attendance. That apparent increase came about because of a change in the way attendance is counted. He said it is not fair to say practices are now run for the convenience of GPs rather than patients; patients currently have higher expectations. On average they visit their GP 5 times a year when previously it was 3.5 times a year. Many GPs

work 13 hour days and often work Saturdays; but the heavy workload is driving older GPs to early retirement and vexing younger ones. There simply isn't the money to recruit more. "Walk-in centres" are being phased out because they duplicated the "GPs out of hours" service.

There was general negativity about moving the Community Mental Health Recovery Service to Godalming. In particular patients are returning to work without local support, and often to jobs not suitable for them.

Sir Mike stated, and it was universally agreed, that the NHS is a political "football"; therefore the debate so obviously needed cannot happen. The British population has an unrealistically high expectation of the NHS. Many remember when it was the best in the world, free at the point of delivery. No politician feels able to say that three into one won't go. We can't afford to provide the services the public now assumes it should have. If we want an NHS as it was in the past, we must pay more for it. Equipment and treatments are now more expensive. Targets need strategies. If they are too high or arbitrary they simply cause stress. They should be a means to an end, not an end in themselves. Sir Mike complained of the demands of onerous reporting, often on a daily basis, to politicians who are weary of attack from the opposition and unhealthy headlines. He said politicians should govern, not manage. Their attempts at managing are most often ill-informed and their new ideas don't help.

Finally, Belinda Schwehr thanked the panel for their participation. She also thanked the host Andrew Carter, Head Teacher of South Farnham School. The amount raised through voluntary contributions was nearly £250 for Disability Challengers and Macmillan Nurses