



Alan Johnson tours a hospital: ministers say trusts could benefit from the proposals

NHS

Doubts over plans to let private sector run trusts

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Government plans to allow private companies to take over the management of failing NHS trusts have been met with caution.

Management and HR experts have expressed doubts over plans announced last week by the Department of Health (DH) to improve the performance of NHS trusts, including bringing in teams from the private sector to run failing hospitals (see panel, right). Healthcare unions and

doctors' groups have warned that the scheme could amount, effectively, to privatisation of parts of the health service.

Mike Emmott, CIPD adviser, employee relations, told *PM* he understood the temptation to bring in private-sector managers but added such managers might get frustrated that

they couldn't find the levers to pull to make change happen in the way they could in the private sector. "Senior managers spend all their time trying to meet targets and keep ministers happy," he added.

Jane Burtoft, former HR director of Leeds Mental Health Teaching NHS Trust, told *PM*: "This move suggests there is not

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any talent in the NHS at the moment and that is not true. It's unfair to believe the private sector has all the answers," she said.

Dr Naomi Chambers, head of health policy and management at Manchester Business School, said: "There's not a magic solution to what are difficult management challenges. That's not to say the NHS does not need fresh thinking, but it can come from business or from within the NHS itself," she said.

She said current NHS talent was not being made best use of.

Chambers added that, while there was a danger of sending out a signal of no confidence in NHS managers, patients and staff wanted "to seek out the best in terms of management talent wherever it comes from".

Allyson Pollock, head of the Centre for International Public Health Policy at the University of Edinburgh, warned that the plans were "all part of a larger privatisation programme".

She said the private sector had never run a universal healthcare service so there was no evidence of its expertise,

and that there had been "no analysis of the causes of the problems which are all made by a government who wants to use NHS managers and staff as whipping boys and girls".

Deborah O'Dea, president of the Healthcare People Management Association, told *PM* that finding talent to fill big and complex senior posts was not a problem exclusive to the NHS.

"If we are to encourage talent from the wider pool I think it will be important to learn the lessons from the past: has a modernised NHS dealt with the bureaucratic inertia that frustrated those 1980s recruits?" she asked.

The NHS Confederation agreed that the independent sector had a role to play in addressing poor performance in the health service, but said that "failure is often systematic rather than managerial".

The DH said it did not expect "huge numbers" of cases of private companies taking over management of NHS trusts.

◆ **What do you think?**

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TRUSTS IN THE SPOTLIGHT

The government's "Developing the NHS Performance Regime" sets out new measures to identify failing hospital trusts, remove poor managers and bring in new teams from either other parts of the NHS, foundation trusts or the private sector. Trusts that fail to meet new minimum standards of quality, safety and financial management within a given time period could be considered for takeover. The standards are to be published in autumn.