

## On a precipice: the UK's broken health-care system

An Essay published on Dec 14, 2022, in *The Lancet Oncology* by Pat Price and colleagues provides a bleak narrative and makes for a disheartening and depressing read. The authors present a frank and candid assessment of cancer care in the UK over the past decade, revealing a health-care system that is nearing a cataclysmic event. A system in which health professionals are understaffed, underpaid, and at the very lowest morale. A system in which cancer outcomes are worsening, patient access to care and screening is substantially declining, and that is no longer able to meet best-practice, oncologically safe targets or provide all patients across the four nations of the UK with equitable, world-leading care.

December, 2022, will also see, for the time ever, a strike by nurses—the cornerstone of any health-care system. No nurse wants to take this action—they care for their patients far too much to inflict such disruptions—but reluctantly they feel there is no alternative as their concerns about pay and conditions have been ignored for many years. Reports of nurses needing to access food banks because their pay is too low is a national embarrassment. Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, 38% of nurses reported needing to use a food bank and 55% were considering leaving the profession. These statistics are inevitably worse now, in the midst of a cost of living crisis fuelled by an inflation rate of more than 11%—a level not seen since October, 1981. The Trussell Trust, the UK's largest food bank network, has reported a 40% increase in the use of their services, and

anecdotally there are reports of students being warned against a career in nursing.

Considering these events and reports, *The Lancet Oncology* has written on several occasions in the past 2 weeks to both Stephen Barclay, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, and to Steve Brine, Chair of the Health Select Committee, asking for their reactions, thoughts, and solutions to the diabolical health-care record presented in the Essay. The only response received at the time of press was from Steve Brine who simply thanked us for sight of the Essay, but provided no opinion or perspective. That the UK's elected representatives responsible for health care have nothing to say and are unwilling to go on record with their interpretation of current events, or more helpfully, a credible vision of the future, is remarkable. What does this say about the UK Government? It tells us they are morally bankrupt, bereft of ideas, and not fit to govern. Yet, opposition parties should not take this as an endorsement of their ideas, which are similarly lacking in detail and only strong on rhetoric. Politicians of all persuasions need to stop the point-scoring and the childish bickering, and work together to develop a pragmatic, practicable, and safe health-care system that delivers for staff and patients. What will it take for this to happen? Thousands of treatable patients with cancer dying needlessly? We cannot wait any longer.

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