

2048: The NHS reaches 100!

“The English National Health Service reached its 100th birthday on July 5th 2048. Unlike its 60th birthday, there were no big celebrations of its achievements simply a by-line in the newspapers to acknowledge its passing. Health care has changed a lot in the intervening 40 years, particularly with the technological advances made in human genetics and organ transplantation. However it is our social relations as citizens between the state and each other that have changed the most.

We are all market actors now, having been seduced by the glorification of self help, freedom and choice that neoliberal fundamentalism promised. People are living longer but the gap in health and social inequalities has continued to widen both between and within countries. In England, the wealthiest 30% of the population have effectively been absolved of any social responsibility with regard to health and enjoy access to the best biomedicine money can buy. The majority of us spend most of our time sifting through medical advertisements hunting for care - wherever that might be. You just don't know whom to trust anymore! Health care tourism is the norm with the chronically ill living nomadic lives. The worst off in our society are ‘thrown upon an underfunded rump system of public health care’¹ (the remnants of what people call the NHS) to encourage them to change their wicked behaviour and feckless habits. The poor have little bargaining power in the health care market and suffer the consequences of ‘accumulation by dispossession’². Accumulation by dispossession is about stripping somebody of their assets or their rights, for example some sell their own body parts to the wealthy at a health loss to themselves.

However, ‘a sympathetic heart for the misery of others’ is palpable. A new public movement is stirring and it points the finger for the demolition of our society squarely at the proponents of the neoliberal agenda. The state began the commodification of health care in the late 1990s³ as this was a pre-requisite for private capital to infiltrate what had previously been a non-market sector. International trade laws such as the General Agreement on Trade Services (GATs) opened up a ‘global free-trade battering ram behind which private capital swarmed into health care’.¹ This was supported by European trade agreements.

With hindsight, amidst the 60th birthday celebrations of the NHS, our parents and grandparents accepted the neoliberal doxa as the only way to see the world. They relied on the ‘alleged self-healing virtues of unconscious growth’⁴ and individual choice to guide the market. However, as Bauman⁵ pointed out:

“The factors that constitute individuality – confinement to individual resources and individual responsibility for the results of life choices – are not themselves a matter of choice...More often than not, control over life is the way the story of life is told, rather than the way in which life is lived” (p69)

The dominance of economic law over other branches of law has created a Utopia for some and a living hell for others. We are good at individual justice (particularly through the law courts) but we have forgotten about the individual and collective benefits of social justice.”

Of course this is a story, mere fantasy. The future is hard to predict and 2048 is a long way off. A lot can happen in 40 years. “This could never happen here”, some of you say. Well it is already happening in other places in the world, mostly those with developing economies, and it could happen here just as easily. The inspiration for the story is taken from the authors’ writings cited below, and by Harrington in particular.

The promotion of social justice was a key idea in the birth of the NHS and yet we are far from achieving this. Today's wicked problems such as climate change, diminishing natural resources and expanding health inequalities, push the idea even further into the realms of Utopian fallacy. Even so, the idea touches us emotionally as something to aspire to: the means to a common good and health for all. Policy is not cast in stone, it is an evolving process, and laws change. It is time to stand up and be counted: our grandchildren would demand it!

If you wish to work with the Politics of Health Group on this or any other public health issues please contact Debbie at contact@pohg.org.uk

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¹ Harrington J. 'Law and the Commodification of Health Care in Tanzania.' *Law, Social Justice and Global Development* 2004; (2)

Accessible at: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/law/elj/lgd/2003_2/harrington/

² Harvey D. *The New Imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2003

³ Pollock A. *NHS PLC: Privatisation of Our Health Care*. London: Verso. 2004

⁴ Polanyi K. *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1957

⁵ Bauman Z. *Society Under Siege*. London: Polity Press. 2002