

How to get Britain's NHS back on its feet

Concerns about the sustainability of Britain's healthcare system are not new, as shown in Adam KAY's book, published in 2017, in which he testifies as a junior doctor who worked for the NHS (doc 2). In 2024, Keir Starmer's newly-elected Labour government made NHS reform a top priority but, as shown in the cartoon by Davey published in *The Telegraph* in 2024 (doc 4) and also by an article by Campbell published in *The Guardian* in January 2025 (doc 1) and in an article from *The Boar* published in February 2025 (doc 3), the government's plan did not gain unanimous support, which leads to the following question: which reform operation could rescue the NHS?¹

As underlined by Kay but also in *The Boar*, Britons are very proud of the NHS, a system created in 1948 which provides free care for all. Yet, in the cartoon, another reality is highlighted: an old, ailing system which struggles to take care of patients who have no other choice but to suffer waiting for treatment, as shown by both the health monitor and the downward graph. Waiting times, also mentioned in documents 1 and 3, are a plague. So are staff shortages², as explained in documents 1 and 2 and depicted by Davey through the absence of staff in the cubicles.

All this has led to a decline in public trust in the NHS (doc 3), which is illustrated by Kay's rich friends asking him whether they should go private to deliver babies (doc 2). Not only have patients and doctors – like Kay himself – considered the private sector as an alternative to the NHS for years, but so has the government, be it Labour³ or Conservative (docs 1, 2 and 3). This choice, however, is regarded as unwise by all the experts assessing it in the documents. Campbell deems it inefficient. Kay and the experts in doc 3 argue greedy private providers could prioritise quantity⁴ over quality of care. Kay is sickened by the idea that the NHS could be turned into an American-style system letting down the most vulnerable, as in the cartoon.

Beyond the rejection of privatisation, the documents also fiercely condemn the rhetoric of politicians around health. In the cartoon, Starmer's energetic pose and his shout "One, Two, Three... REFORM!" suggest a misguided enthusiasm for reform. Starmer turns his back to patients and is only interested in making Labour fit again. The gap between pledges, mentioned in documents 1 and 3, and the actual realities of the service described in all the documents is wide. In *The Boar*, the writer condemns politicians who want to rescue themselves more than the NHS.

(438 words)

¹ Which reform procedure could revive the NHS? / What kind of treatment could cure the NHS?

² ...which lead to backlogs and overwork

³ from Tony Blair (PM 1997-2007) to Starmer (PM since July 2024).

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2023/jul/05/tony-blair-urges-expanded-role-for-private-sector-as-nhs-turns-75>
Tony Blair urges expanded role for private sector as NHS turns 75 (The Guardian, 2023)

⁴ = treating as many patients as possible to make extra money and buy a Mercedes with chauffeur (cf. Kay).

Finding remedies to Britain's sick health system / How to get Britain's NHS back on its feet

<p>January 2025 – <i>The Guardian</i> – an article / Explainer – CAMPBELL</p>	<p>2017 – extract from Adam KAY's book, a testimony as a junior doctor.</p>	<p>February 2025 – <i>The Boar</i> – Abhay VENKITARAMAN – UK uni paper.</p>	<p>Sept. 2024 – a cartoon by DAVEY – <i>The Telegraph</i>.</p>
<p>It explains and assesses Starmer's reform plan for the NHS.</p>	<p><i>"This is going to Hurt"</i> – about the ills affecting the NHS, from staff to patients.</p>	<p>The views of experts attending a panel discussion on the crisis in British healthcare.</p>	<p>A right-wing daily commenting on Starmer's NHS reform plans.</p>
<p>The NHS is in crisis, and the problems are listed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Backlogs (a large number of things waiting to be done) - Waiting times (on a constant increase since Covid-19) - Staff shortages <p>A campaign pledge and a priority for the Labour government: reforming to change the system for the better. → 92% of patients waiting for planned care in England will be treated within 18 weeks.</p> <p>The solutions offered by the gvt and assessed by health experts (like chief analyst Siva ANANDACIVA):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Develop a network of CDCs: to improve diagnosis and reduce pressure on hospitals. ➤ More operations in surgical hubs. <p>→ Both could be helpful but are neither new nor gamechangers as NHS staff shortages could be an obstacle for them to work properly. There are plenty of unfilled vacancies in the NHS.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ➤ Resorting to the private sector to treat NHS patients – outsourcing patients to for-profit actors. <p>Not new – has existed since Tony Blair's reforms in 2000s – and unlikely to cut waiting times. Nothing radical in this reform: cf. Conservative approaches.</p>	<p>Britons are proud of the NHS. It is almost like a religion for them: it does an amazing job and takes care of Britons for free from the cradle to the grave, in keeping with the promise made by its creator, Bevan, in 1948.</p> <p>KAY: it is irreplaceable, special = unique, exceptional</p> <p>Yet, it is in crisis, as shown by the testimony:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - the vicious hours - the bureaucracy – paperwork, red tape - the understaffing – lack of staff - inefficiency (cf. Gmail) <p>An alternative to the NHS → privatisation of the NHS.</p> <p>KAY worked in the private sector and, at first, saw it as a viable alternative to save taxpayers' money. As a junior doctor he thought working for the private sector from time to time could be a way to top up his incomes and afford a few extras.</p> <p>Yet, he changed his mind, warning against privatisation, described as "horrifying" = horrible, sickening, appalling, dreadful for several reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - consultants working in the private sector can encourage you to spend more on elective (= non urgent) procedures (to make more money) - the system could turn into an American-style system, letting down the poorest. - the private sector is not as safe as the NHS in case of emergency, namely for childbirth. 	<p>The crisis in the NHS has been obvious for years:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - waiting times keep increasing - public trust in the NHS has fallen and the service is no longer deemed good enough. <p>With Keir Starmer's election and the arrival of the Labour party in power in July 2024, discussions about reforming the NHS have been revived. Reform was a campaign pledge and an absolute priority for the government to remain credible.</p> <p>The goal: 92% of patients should wait no longer than 18 weeks for treatment.</p> <p>The means: relying more heavily on the private sector (through agreements & partnerships) to increase NHS capacity and bring more flexibility.</p> <p>To the gvt, it is THE solution and criticising it amounts to being dogmatic. The writer strongly disagrees with this approach and calls for nuance and open-mindedness, as the one she could see during a panel discussion on health she attended.</p> <p>Several experts on health, using the example of the Covid-19 crisis, assessed the solution of privatisation and appear sceptical for the following reasons:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Private providers could give priority to quantity (treating as many patients as possible to make money) over quality (of the care provided). - Private providers may prefer treating fee-paying patients, letting the poorest down, and undermining the very essence of the NHS. 	<p>→ 2 months after Starmer was elected – an assessment of Labour's plans for the NHS.</p> <p>→ In an NHS hospital (cf. the logo): two patients lying in adjacent beds, waiting for treatment, each one in a cubicle – in Accident & Emergency (A&E).</p> <p>The patients stand for the health of the NHS as shown by the downward graph: a major decline - in funding, staff = a fragile health. → a metaphor for the worsening performance of the NHS.</p> <p>On the right: an old man – cf. NHS founded in 1948 – panting for breath = breathing with difficulty. The health monitor displaying declining vital signs ("BEEP BEEP!") suggests the patient may be having a stroke. He's on a drip and is alone: there is no staff around...</p> <p>The only person around is a politician: Starmer wearing an aerobics outfit and jumping. The patient in the background has no choice but to follow his path towards REFORM.</p> <p>The cartoonist is very critical of Starmer who is shown turning his back to patients = he does not care about them and is only interested in being in the spotlight, leading his political NHS fitness class to provide a reform that fits Britons but above all keeps Labour fit as well → A gap between political promises (or reforms) and actual realities faced by service. His energetic pose, coupled with his shout, "One, Two, Three... REFORM!" suggests a misguided enthusiasm for reform.</p>

