

Lord Owen interview: Rallying support for the NHS

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Whatever ministers knew about the impact on practices when they decided to withdraw MPIG funding, they could not have known the direct effect on one of parliament's most vocal and respected opponents of government health policy.

Up the road from the Jubilee Street Practice in Tower Hamlets, east London, which has spearheaded the campaign against MPIG cuts, is the famous Limehouse residence of David Owen.

Lord Owen of the City of Plymouth - former neurological and psychiatric registrar, Labour health secretary and foreign secretary, and leader of the Social Democratic Party (SDP) - has been a patient at Jubilee Street Practice since 1965.

A life baron since 1992, his office on the edge of Hyde Park is a long way from the deprived, multicultural East End community around Jubilee Street.

Paintings of ships and a clock in a ship's wheel recall the Devon hometown he served as MP for 26 years and his role as navy minister in Harold Wilson's first government in the 1960s.

Sitting in a large armchair in front of shelves of books, many by or about himself, the 76-year-old says he will continue to defend the practice which has served his family for nearly half a century.

After joining a four-hour march between East End practices in June, Lord Owen told Save Our Surgeries campaigners the government had a hidden aim behind MPIG withdrawal - to close practices.

Markets, not needs

Policy, believes Lord Owen, is being driven by the priorities of economies of scale and markets, rather than clinical need.

Ministers, he says, 'knew a hundred practices were going to close' when they made the decision to withdraw MPIG. 'It's very clear they were warned of all these dangers by the permanent administration of the NHS,' he adds.

'Some practices have to close. But you have to know, roughly, what is the impact. When you come to Jubilee Street Practice, one of the best in the area, it is being penalised for being a good practice.

'To just callously throw them over your shoulder, knowing what is going to happen, shows the problem we have with NHS England. It was put across a barrel, but the DH will say it has no responsibility, it is NHS England's decision.'

Following his leading role in the campaign against the 2012 Health and Social Care Bill, Lord Owen has continued to fight 'the Lansley reforms', drawing up an NHS reinstatement bill to overturn some of its most contentious parts.

The NHS, he says, is collapsing, and those who warned against Lansley's reforms have been proved right.

The crisis in GP funding is just the first effect on general practice. The 2012 Act has insulated the health service from political, democratic and public accountability, he believes.

NHS England, he says, has been lumbered with the MPIG cuts by ministers who are 'in effect washing their hands of it'. The organisation has a 'fundamental problem' of legitimacy and is 'coming unstuck by the month', he adds.

With a democratic NHS answerable to parliament, he adds, 'you get a feeling it is fair. Not perfect, but you can vent your anger, it can be taken up by a newspaper, demand action and you get something done.'

The current system will erode the doctor/patient relationship, with patients increasingly treated as consumers who no longer trust their doctor to make decisions on clinical need alone.

In March, Lord Owen announced he would back Ed Miliband's Labour party at the

next general election. Thirty-three years after he helped inflict a damaging split on the party, forming the breakaway SDP, Lord Owen said he was donating money to Labour to help his former party 'rescue the NHS'.

He now sits as an independent social democrat in the Lords, rather than a crossbencher, but makes clear: 'I am not independent on this issue.'

GPs should consider, he says, backing Labour MP Clive Efford's private member's bill to repeal the 2012 Health Act, which is scheduled for debate in November.

Rallying cry

Labour's leadership is backing the bill and Lord Owen says it could become a 'rallying cry' for NHS campaigners ahead of the 2015 general election.

He warns shadow health secretary Andy Burnham and Ed Miliband against another disruptive reorganisation, given 'the present delicate state of the NHS'.

General practice, Lord Owen says, is the 'fulcrum of medical care', and the next government must expand its resources and shield secondary care from unnecessary demand.

'There is no way general practice can face the reduction in overall costs without it having huge implications elsewhere,' he warns. 'GP funding is starting now with (MPIG cuts). There will be lots more of this.'

The current policy direction of consumer choice and funding changes, he warns, will lead to some practices being encouraged to build up their lists, while others will see numbers decline and standards forced down. 'People will be left with no choice,' he says. 'No general practice near you.'