



Entry by Zaki Kabir - First prize year 11-12 Dulwich College

## Striking at the heart of the NHS?

The NHS is one of the most treasured institutions our country has to offer. A socialised healthcare provision, whose foundation is based upon the belief that treatment should always be freely available at the point of need. Almost every single person in the UK will have interacted with this service at some point in their lives. It has always been there when people are at their most vulnerable and in the greatest of need. Such an elegantly simple notion and so enmeshed in every stage of our lives, it is easy not to appreciate the magnitude of its worth. At the very heart of this colossus are the millions of dedicated staff, healthcare professionals and otherwise who ensure that the institution runs to best effect.

From humble origins some 75 years ago, Aneurin (Nye) Bevan, championed the creation of the National Health Service to provide free health care 'to secure improvement in the physical and mental health of the people and the prevention, diagnosis and treatment of illness'. It now stands among the top ten best healthcare providers in the world and in the top 5 that are free. This is no small achievement for a system that is funded entirely by the taxpayer, on ever decreasing budgets. Spending in real terms, as a proportion of GDP in 1949 was ~3.5% - this in the immediate aftermath of the second world war. It peaked in 2010, at almost 8% and excepting the anomaly of spending during the Covid Pandemic, it has steadily

decreased ever since, creating a yawning chasm between spending and inflation. Nowhere is this more acutely noted than in the pay packets of the healthcare professionals upon whose back the health of the nation rests.

Accounting for inflation, all professional staff have had a pay cut of between 6-10% in the last decade, with predictions for the coming year plummeting to -14.5% for consultant level doctors. In today's global market there is no incentive for highly qualified individuals to remain in the public sector, or indeed the country when faced with such pecuniary disadvantage. How are we to maintain our workforce when their efforts are so poorly rewarded? On the subject of our workforce we cannot ignore the ramifications of our departure from the European Union. In a time when, in England alone, there are vacancies for greater than 10,500 physicians, the impact of Brexit has been to reverse the steady increase in European Doctors working in the UK. The latest figures suggest that more than 4,000 fewer Doctors are working in the UK compared to pre-2016.

Fast forward to 2020 and the onset of the Coronavirus Pandemic - heralding 2 years of immense physical and psychological pressure on the remaining workforce. There are no words to describe the debt owed by the public to these selfless individuals who placed themselves in harm's way to care for those

suffering from Covid. They put themselves at risk of infection right from the beginning when so little was known and continued their efforts even when the government failed to provide sufficient PPE. On top of all of this, they witnessed countless deaths on a daily basis. Often these individuals, nurses in particular, were the only source of comfort for patients dying alone with no one else to hold their hands. For performing their duty to the highest of standards and exemplifying the very best of what the NHS stands for – we clapped! While it is true that these people are heroic, it is important that we recognise that they are not the kind found in fiction, who require little more than thanks. They are real human beings, with real problems and real needs.

In the last six months we have seen a rising tide of solidarity in the form of collective action. In a monumental and historic move, the Royal College of Nurses balloted in favour of a strike. This motion perhaps underpins the gravity of the situation which our NHS faces. It was 2016 when similar action was taken by Junior Doctors for the first time, following along from their paramedic colleagues, with every indication that more strikes will follow in the future. Industrial action is never taken lightly and when the industry is healthcare even less so. However, it is essential to stray away from the narrative that the strikes or the unions imposing them are the problem. Far from it, they are taking the drastic steps needed to ensure the longevity of the NHS itself. NHS workers are currently incredibly disillusioned –

not with the work itself but with the conditions under which they are forced to work. I have chosen to focus upon the beating heart of the NHS which is its workforce, however this is not to say that chronic underfunding is limited to this element. We must not forget the failing infrastructure and lack of equipment which plagues many a department, further eroding the workplace.

So, has the perfect storm been created and for what purpose? The Government's misguided austerity has left recruitment and retention at an all-time low. Underfunding has made conditions in the NHS wholly unattractive. This has increased the pressure on the remaining staff both physically and financially. We are now at the horrifying stage where nurses frequenting food banks is increasingly the norm. The cynic within me feels that in the grand tradition of privatisation (Royal Mail, National Rail, Gas and Electric) the NHS may be the next casualty of the greedy and the (not so) good! Could those who stand to profit be sanctioning increasing waiting lists and ambulance response times to a level so intolerable that the public is frightened into allowing the pursuit of private healthcare? Perhaps this is the only way to produce this outcome with minimal resistance, manufacturing the concern and consent.

When will this vicious cycle end? One hopes not with the wanton dismantling of one of the world's greatest health services and our nation's pride.