

## MEDICINE BALLS

### Cameron's conflict

**WHY** has David Cameron decided to go to war with the NHS? With nearly every professional organisation and journal opposing the health and social care bill, public support for it at 18 percent and Downing Street briefing the *Times* that the health secretary should be "taken out and shot", Cameron has decided to be "at one with Andrew Lansley".

In turning the health bill into a confidence vote, with the Lib Dems driving the getaway car, it's extremely unlikely to fail. But it will hand Ed Milliband so many open goals before the next election even he can't fail to score.

It's doubtful Cameron has read the bill in its entirety – it was unintelligible even before the 300 amendments – but Lansley does a very convincing line in whispered one-liners. The bill will apparently "safeguard the NHS for the future", "put patients first" and "give frontline staff the right to determine how the NHS budget is spent". Lansley insists that to achieve this, the NHS needs a lot more legislation and competition, but there's no evidence base for these reforms, so it's a huge leap of faith getting staff and patients to trust him.

Politicians rarely have jobs outside management consultancy or law, so it's not surprising the only professions lining up to make sense of chaotic legislation at £200 an hour are... management consultants and lawyers.

Support from GPs has fallen as Lansley's promises haven't stacked up. The fantasy that GP commissioning groups could be the size of bridge clubs has been stamped on by the Department of Health. Small groups have been forced to merge into larger ones and forced again to have the same boundaries as the local authority. And the promise of less bureaucracy is laughable. The bill has replaced three levels of management with up to eight, and nobody has a clear understanding of what these organisations will do or how they'll work together. They're unlikely to liberate the NHS, but the opportunities for tax avoidance are huge.

Even if frontline staff do get to play at deciding

how the money should be spent, there is no evidence that they'll do it well or have the time or energy to do it. Labour's massive drive for "world-class commissioning" was a belly flop, not because frontline staff were excluded, but because the NHS doesn't measure and compare outcomes to allow meaningful choices. If you buy a suit, you can feel the width and take it back if it falls apart. It's harder to do that with a breast implant. So the NHS just buys the cheapest and hopes it doesn't burst. The PIP scandal is an extreme example of what happens when you compete on cost (PIP implants were a fifth the price of competitors') without paying attention to quality.

The one bit of Lansley's reforms that does make



### Fallen angels

"The policy says you have to see a doctor within four hours... This is him on holiday in Tunisia last summer"

M.D. has argued for published outcomes since exposing the Bristol heart scandal in 1992. Twenty years on, adult heart surgeons are the only profession putting their results on show to allow commissioners and patients to choose. If the NHS is going to compete, it has to compete on getting patients better, not balancing the books by fobbing breast cancer patients off with cheap silicon meant for mattresses.

Measuring is not the only solution. An open, transparent culture that ensures management act on poor outcomes rather than deny it, as in Mid Staffs, is equally vital. At present, the best smoke alarm in the NHS is patients, relatives and staff speaking up when they encounter appalling care, yet the brutal suppression of whistleblowers (*Eyes passim ad nauseam*) shows how much NHS culture needs to change.

Alas, when a PM stakes his reputation on reform, the NHS nearly always becomes more brutal and bullying and buries bad news. Cameron is about to repeat Blair's mistake.

M.D.

## The Agri Brigade

**F**ARMERS love wildlife and 86 percent of them consider conservation an important part of the management of their farms. Or so claims a survey by The Voluntary Initiative, a body comprising farmer organisations and agri-chemical companies set up in 2001 to head off the threat of a "pesticide tax".

Claiming to be dedicated to wildlife conservation is a constant refrain of farmer groups. In truth, not many farmers are interested in bio-diversity unless the result of it can be put to flight by a dog and shot.

Evidence of how low a priority conservation is for many farmers comes with the latest wild bird population statistics for 1970-2010 from the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. Published at the end of November, they show that while overall breeding bird populations in the UK have changed little over 40 years, there is one glaring exception: farmland birds.

In 2010 the 19 species that rely on farmland for their

survival were at their lowest populations ever recorded – half what they were in 1970 – while species like the corn bunting, grey partridge, tree sparrow and turtle dove showed a 90 percent decline.

➤ To suggest farmers do not give conservation a high priority should not be taken as criticism: farmers are in business to produce food. They have to compete to rent or buy land; and if they compromise efficiency by engaging in conservation, they will soon be supplanted by those who have squeezed the last ounce of productivity from their land with a more profitable result.

Policy makers who want to reverse the loss of farmland bio-diversity would do well to understand this rather than swallow the nonsense put out by farmer organisations that farmers are all committed conservationists.

The proposed "greening" of the common agricultural policy (CAP) at the next round of reform in 2014 is a positive step.

But this has been greeted with predictable howls of protest by the likes of the NFU. The threat of withdrawing up to 30 percent of subsidy unless a farmer engages in conservation measures would reduce the competitive advantage of those who use the most productive but least wildlife-friendly farming techniques on their land.

To many non-farmers it is a mystery why those who spend their working days amid the wonders of nature aren't more interested in wildlife conservation. But as George Orwell pointed out in 1944 when reviewing Sir William Beach Thomas' *The Way of a Countryman*: "Real rustics are not conscious of being picturesque, they do not construct bird sanctuaries, they are uninterested in any plant or animal that does not affect them directly... The fact is that those who really have to deal with nature have no cause to be in love with it."

'New Bio-Waste Spreader'

## SIGNAL FAILURES



It'll cost ya

**ONE** of the painful lessons of rail privatisation is that uncertainty costs money. So why has the government chosen to outsource train services on two chunks of the network as they undergo major and unpredictable upgrades?

Even franchises with established and stable services have been bad value for taxpayers. Many received bailouts (even as the economy boomed); some made unwarranted profits; others crashed and left taxpayers to pick up the pieces. Yet the government now reckons the best way to keep trains running through the Thameslink and Great Western upgrades is to hand them to firms whose main task will be to extract the highest possible profit. The bungled west-coast upgrade, when Virgin demanded and got eye-watering unplanned subsidy (*Eyes passim*) is already forgotten.

In the South-east, north and south of London, the Thameslink franchise is due to replace First Capital Connect in September 2013 and cover the remainder of the Thameslink 2000 upgrade, which includes introducing new trains and rebuilding London Bridge station (Britain's fourth busiest) over five years. The official invitation to tender says the franchise will take over "some services" now run by Southeastern "at a point between April and December 2014" and will incorporate all Southern services "at some time between July 2014 and July 2017".

Meanwhile the GW franchise, from April 2013, covers track electrification to Oxford, Newbury, Bristol and Cardiff and the handover of some commuter services to Crossrail (London's new east-west railway). It's "currently expected" that the franchisee will manage introduction of new trains, which the government still hasn't ordered despite spending tens of millions and several years developing the bizarre "Super Express" train (*Eyes passim*). Bidders are expected to "explore" variations in how the "planned" trains are deployed.

They may get "greater commercial freedom to design train services" and might be allowed to suggest "a reduction in the level of service" from the government's proposals. Muddying the waters again, the government advises of "possible devolution of some specification or management of services".

The government can't possibly foresee how these upgrades will pan out, yet it chooses to compound the uncertainty by conducting several rail-franchising experiments at the same time. With so many variables, it won't be able to compare different bids objectively or choose the winners with confidence.

Firms will raise the prices in their bids to reflect all the perceived risks. Once ensconced, the winning firms can hold taxpayers over a barrel when they're asked to do something the government didn't foresee; they'll be well aware that booting out an unreasonable franchisee and staging another slow and expensive franchise contest is impractical in the middle of so much disruption. As the upgrades progress, the government or Network Rail may identify better ways of implementing some aspects – but reject them to avoid the cost and bureaucracy of varying a franchise contract.

Tories, Lib Dems and Labour are ideologically wedded to rail franchising and no amount of official reports on wasted money and "misaligned incentives" can change that. But even that blind faith in the benevolence of outsourcing contractors isn't incompatible with having a temporary not-for-profit outfit to run Thameslink and GW trains during the upheaval. Then the train operator's decisions, including critical ones about investments and "level of service", could be based on the long-term interests of taxpayers and passengers, rather than the short-term outlook dictated by the length of franchises and the importance of favourable stock-market reports.

'Dr B Ching'