

Consultant 51

28 June 2012

Dear Sirs,

- . The private healthcare market is not “open” because the actions and policies of private health insurers and private hospital providers obstruct free access to the way they conduct their business. Deals are done behind closed doors and without scrutiny by patients or doctors or regulators.
- . Private health insurers have unfair and largely unchallenged power of control over the healthcare market because they seek to be provider, regulator and insurer at the same time. Their interests are therefore conflicting and prohibit free and open competition.
- . Insurers make value and quality statements about doctors thereby holding a powerful influence on medical trade. These statements are based on data which they collect and apply to individual medical practitioners in secret. When challenged to share the data and discuss the methods and benchmarks applied in order to compare one doctor with a cohort of his peers the PMI`s (private medical insurers) refuse to co-operate citing commercial sensitivity and confidentiality . Such lack of transparency would be offensive in any other walk of life especially when we are dealing with personal, professional details. The OFT market research criticized lack of information for patients to make informed choices but what could be more restrictive than to have information held about a doctor and not know how it was collected or what it proves ? Why are PMI`s so secretive when the medical profession is so ready to deal open handedly ? How can such attitudes fail to have an influence on a market where skill, competency , reputation and fair value for money are vital for success ?
- . Access to best practice and “top doctors” is deliberately restricted by the operation of “open referral” plans most of which are applied to people insured by their employers. These schemes use the same language in promotional literature as for other PMI products and give the corporate consumer the false impression that they can see a doctor of their choice and have access to unrestricted levels of treatment. Nothing could be further from the truth. So called “open” referral is a method of assuring referral to a “closed book” of specialists and hospitals/clinics selected by the PMI and not a referring doctor. This closed list often excludes access to doctors who are world leading authorities in their fields working in some of the best hospitals in the UK. The method by which the doctors and facilities are selected for the closed list are not made public by the insurers which is surely anti-competitive and not in the best interests of an open, competitive market ? Patients covered by corporate healthcare plans should be told in plain language about the restrictions implicit in an open referral, closed market healthcare scheme.