

Consultant 234

7 May 2013

Dear Sir/Madam

I am writing to share some views as a Medical Practitioner intended to help to inform your current deliberations about private medical healthcare. I work as a full-time NHS consultant and do one private clinic per week, seeing patients with allergy. The NHS capacity for provision of services to patients who have allergy is woefully inadequate, the Royal College of Physicians estimating that 3 million people in the UK require specialist opinion, and there only being about 50 consultants in the UK able to provide such specialist advice. Patients thus frequently elect to see specialists in the private sector. In this field practitioners of alternative medicine abound, those practices usually being done by people who are not even qualified as doctors. Thus the conventional Private medical service, provided in reputable establishments by properly trained NHS consultants in this area, provides the public with a valuable service which is of high standard.

One of the concerns that has seemingly been raised is that the charges for consultations vary from one practitioner to another. I think that this needs to be thought through carefully, as it is a situation that applies to all of private medicine. If the same charges were to be levied by all practitioners then this would constitute a cartel, which should rightly be viewed as anti-competitive. Practitioners with different levels of experience in (and thus insight into) their specialty, and with different levels of experience of the varied clinical presentations of patients within their specialty should be expected to charge different rates for their consultations. This is because patients are likely of getting more reliable and rapid diagnosis from experience practitioners, who will also be able to give more highly-tailored advice informed by many more years of practice in this field than someone who has recently been appointed as a consultant. One would expect in a free market of such skilled labour a variation in prices charged - in exactly the same way as one would expect a highly skilled, experienced builder of very high local reputation for previous work to charge more than a builder who has just very recently set up in business and does not have 20-30 years of impeccable track record accumulated yet. For the competition commission to expect every builder to charge the same amount for any given job, by prior agreement, without regard to their experience, different skill sets and different track record would be anti-competitive and somewhat ridiculous. For exactly the same reason, it would be just as foolish to take this view of medical practitioners performing their job. It takes many decades of clinical practice to establish a high reputation, and a successful private practice is almost always founded on a very efficient and faultless NHS service provided to the same community. Without incentives such as the ability of different medical practitioners to charge different amounts to private patients, there would be a danger that in due course the standard of service provided to the NHS by NHS consultants would deteriorate over time to that lowest acceptable common denominator of practice, rather than the very highest of standards that the British public enjoys now.

All that is required is for transparency prior to the patient deciding to commit to a consultation or a procedure to be performed. All doctors should as a matter of ethics and course make it obvious what their consultation fees include and what any other fees for any other procedures consist of. This information should be available 'up-front' so that patients can make an informed decision, and compare different practitioners (where there is a meaningful choice), as advised by their general practitioners, other advisers, or increasingly by their own estimation of information increasingly available about practitioners on the Internet.