



The voice of NHS leadership



Conservative Party health and social care policy: Summary of the Secretary of State for Health's speech to Conservative Party conference, Manchester

Jeremy Hunt delivered his fifth speech to Conservative Party conference as health secretary, as part of the 'Fighting Injustices' plenary. The session also included speeches from Conservatives supporting junior doctors and Mid Staffordshire campaigner Debra Hazeldine.

Hunt used his speech to focus on his drive to improve safety and the quality of NHS services.

He began by highlighting the bravery and heroism of NHS staff in Manchester and London, following the attacks earlier in the year and said that it served to remind us how fortunate we are to have the NHS.

He described the health service as "a national symbol of British professionalism and British compassion."

Key announcements

- A 25 per cent increase in the number of nurses trained – a permanent increase of more than 5,000 nurse training places every year.
- Plans to triple the number of nurse associates, allowing staff in the NHS to become a registered nurse following a four-year apprenticeship, without the need for a traditional full-time university course.
- Plans to extend the offer of flexible working to all NHS staff during this parliament, which would start with 12 trusts piloting a new app-based flexible working system to their staff.
- NHS workers would be given first refusal for new homes built on NHS land sold to property developers.

Supporting NHS staff

Hunt pointed to the announcement he made earlier in the year about plans to increase doctor numbers. He said there were also plans to increase the numbers of nurses trained by 25 per cent, a permanent increase of more than 5,000 nurse training places every single year.

He announced government plans to triple the number of nurse associates, allowing staff in the NHS to become a registered nurse following a four-year apprenticeship without the need for traditional full-time university course.

He referred to Derby, Wolverhampton and Coventry universities, which have already offered to run apprenticeship nursing courses on hospital and community sites and said that others would follow.

Speaking about the pay and conditions for staff, he said the government would make a decision on the pay award after listening to the pay review body. He also said that he recognised the importance of supporting the staff that care for us to care for their families.

He announced plans to extend the offer of flexible working to all NHS staff during this parliament, which would start with 12 trusts piloting a new app-based flexible working system to their staff. This would, he said, enable staff to work flexibly, do extra hours at short notice, get paid more quickly when they do and make their own choices on pension contributions.

He also highlighted other policies to support staff, which included an announcement that when NHS land is sold to property developers, first refusal for the new homes that were built would be given to NHS workers.

He congratulated and thanked EU workers in the NHS, saying they did a “fantastic job” and that he was confident they would be able to stay.

Safety and quality

Hunt reminisced on his first days as health secretary, when he was made aware of the 150 avoidable deaths a week in the NHS. He highlighted the actions he had taken to address safety and quality, through the introduction of the first ever Ofsted-style ratings for healthcare and suggested that the early results of the ratings were a “big surprise”, with only four hospitals receiving the highest rating ‘Outstanding’.

He made particular reference to Western Sussex, which he described as having inspirational leadership under Marianne Griffiths. He also pointed to Northumbria Tyne and Wear, which he said was ‘blazing a trail on the safety of mental health patients.’

Discussing the issue of the cost of improving quality, he said that “poor care was the most expensive care” and that his biggest worry in his early days as health secretary was the number of trusts in special measures, which was nearly 1 in every 5. Hunt said that 20 have now come out of these measures.

He used the example of Wexham Park Hospital in Slough as an example of a trust which improved quality and safety and left special measures after two years. He put this down to “the extraordinary leadership” of Sir Andrew Morris and his Frimley team. Hunt stated that this had taught him that “it wasn’t about the staff, it was all about the leadership” and that “you can’t impose quality or safety from above – it has to be part of a culture that comes from the bottom up”. He said that starts with openness and transparency.

Openness and transparency

Hunt explained how he decided not to issue a top-down edict to trusts to recruit more staff, following a Mid Staffs report that found concerns around staffing levels, but instead asked every trust to publish monthly statistics on the number of nurses employed in each of their wards.

The impact was that trusts recruited more nurses and the NHS ended up with 18,000 more nurses than it planned.

He also explained that under the leadership of Professor Tim Briggs, they had begun collecting data on infection rates across the country, which found that the best hospitals infect one in 500 patients and the least good ones infect as many as one in 25 patients. He said that putting that right would save money and reduce human misery.

Hunt celebrated the fact that the proportion of patients being harmed had fallen by 8 per cent and that 200 fewer patients were harmed every single day. He also proudly highlighted that the independent think tank, the Commonwealth Fund, had said the NHS was the best – and safest – healthcare system in the world. Reminding the audience of the work still left to do in this area, he said he wanted the NHS “to blaze a trail” in sorting safety out.

Hunt recognised that staff were keen to learn and improve and that more work was needed to dismantle “the NHS blame culture” so that staff are supported to learn from mistakes, saying that “the world’s largest healthcare organisation must become the world’s largest learning organisation – and it’s my job and my mission to make that happen.”

NHS’s 70th birthday

Hunt reminded the audience that next year is the NHS’s 70th birthday and said that while Nye Bevan deserves credit for founding the NHS in 1948, it was the Conservative health minister in 1944, Sir Henry Willink, whose white paper announced the setting up of the NHS.

He highlighted the need for cross-party support and warned that the NHS should not be a weapon to win votes or a political football. He also told the audience that it was Labour economic policies that would bring the NHS to its knees.

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