

May 16th 2013

The Market Fails Helpline Patients

Claims that markets are good for patients have been put to the test over the last two months, and failed spectacularly in the case of the new healthcare phone line One One One.

Competitive tendering took place to decide which companies should run the service in 44 areas of England as an upgrade on the previous NHS Direct 0845 service and local GP out-of-hours lines. Ministers insisted the new helplines went live on April 1 despite warnings that they were not ready.

Manchester including Stockport was among the worst hit areas in the ensuing chaos, with One One One crashing completely. As a temporary fix the previous 0845 service had to be rapidly reintroduced into the locality, including the use of staff who had been sacked before the changeover.

In total seven of the 44 areas, including Manchester, were considered unable to run any new service. The Department of Health has earmarked £8.7 million to keep old NHS Direct operations running until the end of June, but it is now feared that in some areas the One One One restart will be further delayed.

Meanwhile reports have continued to come in of tragic incidents in areas where One One One providers were allowed to continue operating. According to Pulse magazine, three patients may have died as a result of the system's failings. Nineteen other serious cases were said to be under investigation by the first week of May. But many other patients are known to have been affected by jammed phone lines, long waits for call-backs and poor advice to those who got through.

Squeezing staff costs

Users of One One One have had to contend with both understaffing and poorly trained staff with no previous medical knowledge. In the initial weeks of the services there were also technological glitches closing calls down.

One of the rationales for upgrading the NHS helpline was that it would ease the pressure on overstretched hospital A&E departments. But there are suggestions that sometimes it had the opposite effect, with inexperienced staff passing calls to the ambulance service on a safety-first principle.

The tendering process for One One One was won by a mixture of providers. Manchester and Birmingham were among services going to bids put together by NHS Direct, which is in the public sector. Around a quarter of services were won by the private company Harmoni.

Some defenders of NHS privatisation have claimed that NHS Direct's shambolic work in key One One One contracts was a failure of the traditional public sector. But the reality of competitive tendering is that in order for both public and private organisations to win bids, they must squeeze staffing to the minimum.

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NHS Direct intended to close 24 of its 30 call centres and to slash the pay of remaining staff for its One One One work. The trade union Unison says that the pay cuts are now being scrapped and some call centres will be reopened, retaining hundreds of jobs.