

Doing Away With Democracy!

John Major said on SATV that our two democracies are about to work together on a big scale. This included co-operation in the field of health. He also pointed out quite proudly, the company of high powered business men that were here with him. The news that day was overshadowed by the events in the Zulu Royal House, but I was still left with a niggling thought about democracy and exporting the UK model.

Some weeks prior to this we were visited by two young ex-GPs from the UK. They say that in the area in which they used to practice there are eighty GPs. The oldest amongst them is 47 years old. The reason? General practitioners in the UK are nervous and many are so unhappy that they are taking early retirement.

My conclusion from a distance is that the change process is being driven from the top and that the changes are decreasing the chances of democracy in primary care in the UK. Market forces and central management are calling the tune. I'm going to give only one example of what I mean. Those interested in more information are referred to the long debates in the Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners and the British Medical Journal.

Budget holding for GPs in group practices is being reeled out by the central government in a piece-meal fashion, as an experiment. Participating practices use their budgets to buy certain items of secondary care, such as non emergency surgery, from whomever gives them the best service. At the moment the budgets are well supplied in carrot fashion and practices can buy better and more efficient care for their patients. The money and the responsibility is being handed down to the GP. The savings go to further care in defined areas and not to the GP. Accountability is upward! and no longer to the local structures. The question arises, what will happen when the experiment is over and all are lured into the system? The aim is cost saving and making market forces doing what they do.

Mrs Jones is in need of a hip replacement and so is your friend Pete from high school days. You are holding the budget and it is only sufficient for one person. Is there any way in which Mrs Jones or Pete can trust you to act in their best interest. You have accepted this unpleasant task from the government and you are accountable to them and not the person in front of you or to any local structures. I can see why some are saying, "no thank you..."

We, like the British, are into CHANGE. We also claim allegiance to democratic principles. I sincerely hope that South African generalist doctors will not find themselves between two stones, carrying responsibilities that will interfere with the essence of the patient-doctor relationship once more. As we move to a district health system, it is surely local government that should hold the budget and not the health worker in a democracy.

Everyone uses the word democracy. Let's hear what they mean before we get excited.

