

British health system must reform or face crisis: minister

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Britain's National Health Service faces a "financial crisis" in the next few years unless the government presses ahead with its under-fire reform plans, the health minister warned Thursday.

Andrew Lansley said he was prepared to accept "substantial and significant" changes to his plans to reform the NHS, but warned that maintaining the "status quo" was not an option as Britain faces up to an [ageing population](#).

Lansley said the NHS would face a £20 billion-a-year funding gap over the next four years unless large-scale reforms were introduced.

By 2030, the number of over-85s is projected to reach 3.5 million, or one in 20 of the British population, placing an increasing burden on the NHS, Lansley said in an article in the Daily Telegraph newspaper.

"Our health service is facing huge challenges that, if not dealt with today, will almost certainly mean a crisis tomorrow," he wrote.

Under the radical reforms proposed by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government, control for managing budgets would be taken away from local boards and handed to family doctors.

The reforms would also give the private sector a greater role in running [health services](#), although Lansley insisted Thursday the Conservatives would "never" privatise the NHS.

"But if we choose to ignore the pressures on it, the health service will face a [financial crisis](#) within a matter of years that will threaten the very values we hold so dear -- of a comprehensive health service, available to all, free at the point of use and based on need and not the ability to pay," he said.

The proposals have come under intense pressure after Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg opposed them and made them a key test of the continued cooperation of his Liberal Democrats, the junior partners, in the coalition.

The British Medical Association (BMA), the trade union for doctors, has also voiced strong concern.

In response, Prime Minister David Cameron "paused" the legislative process for the bill to allow a further consultation period, which ended on Tuesday and the government is expected to report back later this month.

Lansley promised the plans would be substantially modified.

"We have always been clear that we are ready to accept any changes -- substantial and significant -- if they help us improve care for patients," he wrote.

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