

UK government wants hospitals to expand overseas

August 21 2012, by JILL LAWLESS

(AP) — The British government said Tuesday that it wants the country's state-funded hospitals to help support themselves by setting up profit-making branches in other countries.

Officials said the country should capitalize on international respect for the British health care brand. But critics accused the government of trying to commercialize the public health service — a touchy issue in British politics.

The Conservative-led government is searching for ways to reform the National Health Service, which provides free treatment to all but costs more than 100 billion pounds (\$158 billion) a year to run.

The government announced Tuesday it was setting up a body called Healthcare U.K. to help world-renowned institutions, such as the Great Ormond Street Hospital for children, establish overseas branches.

The model has been pioneered by U.S. institutions like Baltimore's Johns Hopkins, which manages hospitals in countries including Panama and the United Arab Emirates.

Health Minister Anne Milton said the plan would create jobs and revenue, which would be channeled back into the health service.

"This is good news for NHS patients, who will get better services at their local hospital as a result of the work the NHS is doing abroad and the

extra investment that will generate," she said.

But Jamie Reed, health spokesman for the opposition Labour Party, accused Prime Minister David Cameron of overseeing "rampant commercialization of the NHS."

"He needs to get a grip and start focusing on patients, not profits," Reed said.

Many in Britain are wary of attempts to reform the NHS, which — although unwieldy and overstretched — is widely regarded as a major national accomplishment. Director Danny Boyle won praise for including a musical tribute to the service in the opening ceremony of the London Olympics.

The government has introduced reforms it says will eliminate bureaucracy and give doctors more control. But opponents accuse it of giving private companies a bigger share of health care and undermining the system's universality.

The government insists it has no plan to privatize health care, and points out that parties of all stripes have grappled with rising costs.

The Labour government, in power between 1997 and 2010, oversaw earlier forays into the overseas health care market. In 2007, London's Moorfields Eye Hospital set up a branch in Dubai, and in 2010 the Labour government established NHS Global to promote British health care "to international government and organizations."

The latest reforms come as Britain seeks to trim government spending by 80 billion pounds (\$127 billion) by 2015 in a bid to cut the country's deficit.

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