

# Hospital crisis stokes anger in pre-election Britain

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The protest tents are being taken down but resentment burns on in Stafford, where the hospital is a notorious example of a healthcare crisis roiling Britain ahead of May's general election.

The maternity and paediatrics units have been moved to another town, the emergency ward has to shut down at night because of budget cuts and medical workers are up in arms about too much work and too little pay.

"Staff are on their knees," said Karen Howell, a nurse in this former industrial town in central England who helped set up a protest camp in the hospital grounds and is campaigning with a new political party.

The National Health Action Party is fielding a total of 12 candidates at the election—most of them nurses and doctors in the National Health Service (NHS), Britain's state-funded system of free, universal healthcare.

Although it has little chance of winning a seat in parliament, the party's campaign reflects nationwide concern about the future of the NHS, the number one issue in voters' minds according to one recent poll.

## **'For the people'**

Set up in 1948, the NHS is a source of pride for many Britons and a

constant headache for politicians.

It was once described as the nearest thing the English have to a religion by Margaret Thatcher's finance minister Nigel Lawson.

It has 1.7 million staff—the fifth biggest employer in the world—and its yearly budget is around £130 billion (173 billion euros, \$198 billion).

"The NHS is the crown jewel, you don't touch it," said Howell.

The NHS crisis has been particularly acute this winter, with several emergency wards declaring a "major incident" because they could no longer cope with new patients and "bed blockers"—elderly patients who are too infirm to go home but not sick enough for hospital.

Health think-tank the King's Fund says 2014-2015 data shows that accident and emergency cases are up by 14,500 a week—some three percent—compared to 2013-2014 and there are around three million people on NHS treatment waiting lists.

Opposition Labour leader Ed Miliband, whose party established the system, has promised to "save the NHS", while Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron says he has increased spending and rejected accusations of privatisation by stealth.

"The NHS was never meant to be a profit-making business. It was made for the people," said Cheryl Porter, a Stafford campaigner and mother of four.

Porter, Howell and others helped organise a protest with 50,000 people against NHS cuts in 2013 but she said it had failed to change the minds of managers.

"What's happening in our town is criminal. Removing general acute service is giving everybody here a death threat," she said.

That resentment is felt in many parts of Britain and NHS staff last year took to the streets in their first strike since 1982.

"Services are stretched to the limit," said John Appleby, an economist at the King's Fund.

"The government's big effort is to get through the election without things blowing apart and what happens after that is in the fog."

## **'1,200 deaths'**

Stories about the NHS crisis are legion but Stafford offers a particularly vivid example.

Up to 1,200 patients—often elderly—are thought to have died due to bad treatment received between 2005 and 2009 at Stafford Hospital.

A public inquiry heard they had been "abandoned" and that cost controls were placed above patient care.

Some patients were said to be reduced to drinking water from flower vases—although some local campaigners deny this—or left for hours in their own excrement.

The trust which ran the hospital then has since been dissolved and the hospital was renamed.

But it has continued to struggle. Last month, managers declared a "major incident" as its accident and emergency department struggled to cope.

For all the horror stories, the NHS system is still hugely popular with the general public.

"The NHS is part of our national story," Roger Taylor, a health sector journalist, wrote in his book "God Bless the NHS".

"We love our health service. We love it in a way that has no parallel in other countries," he said. "Criticism can quickly become blasphemy."

But Porter sees the crisis in the context of a broader decline in British society.

"Years and years ago, we were very proud of our industry. A lot of things were made here. We've lost that. The one thing we still call ours is our NHS," she said.

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