

Bruce Newsome in Reaction Nov 2017

The Health Secretary says that the NHS must reduce maternity deaths and injuries, but yet again he's saying something agreeable while avoiding accountability.

Jeremy Hunt says all unexplained cases should be investigated "independently" so that lessons can be learned, but British healthcare is already subject to more than 70 nominally "independent" organizations (by Parliament's own count), and the lessons are always the same, but never learnt.

Why is the Health Secretary suddenly raising maternity risks? The NHS is home to an unusually high rate of avoidable deaths in general, despite high spending, robust education, and dozens of institutions dedicated to learning lessons.

The Health Secretary is perhaps belatedly adjusting to the leak to the Labour Party, back in August 2017, revealing that English maternity wards closed temporarily 382 times in 2016 – a record in recent years. The National Childbirth Trust previously reported that mothers in labour are being "treated like cattle" in NHS wards: half are left alone for hours without care or painkillers. The report's authors – in consultation with the professional groups – chose to blame under-staffing. Hunt now admits that staff numbers must increase. In immediate reaction to Hunt's statement, journalists on BBC Radio 4's Today Programme and a representative from the Royal College of Midwives blatantly colluded to discuss under-staffing as the issue.

What everybody agrees to avoid is structural accountability for malpractice. Currently, hospitals investigate themselves; if parents are unhappy, they can raise a complaint to one of those "independent" organizations or start civil legal action. Increasingly, patients go straight to legal action, given the frustrations and biases of nominally "independent" organizations – whose dominant incentives are to avoid work and to protect the government and/or the professions they represent. The pathology can be appreciated from the fact that the

Parliamentary Health Services Ombudsman (PHSO) – the ultimate “independent” body for any complainant – investigated less than 8% of complaints in peak year, or merely 2,199 complaints; NHS England alone received 175,000 complaints that year. In the most recent year, the number of complaints rose, but the PHSO’s rate fell below 5%. Yet here we go again, with the same old narrative: Hunt says that the new Healthcare Safety Investigations Branch should investigate all unexplained cases, because it is “independent.” However, independent organizations are politically unaccountable organizations, and are usually staffed by cronies who are not practically independent at all – as illustrated by testimonials about PHSO staff treating complainants as liars, idiots, fantasists, egotists, and objects of ridicule. This is not an undiscovered problem, it’s an officially ignored problem: the PHSO has been the top of the pile since 2009, the anti-PHISO pressure groups date from around then, Jeremy Hunt has been Health Secretary since 2012, and I have been reporting the structural explanation for Britain’s high health risks since 2013.

Hunt’s new statement on maternity risks went on: “We have to change a blame culture into a learning culture.” In fact, we don’t have a blame culture, because none of those “independent” organizations ever blames individuals. So far as they ever reach judgements, these are to the effect that “mistakes were made,” but no person is ever held accountable. Focusing on culture is convenient because a culture is the attribute of a group, but is no person’s fault. The new Healthcare Safety Investigations Branch was set up explicitly to avoid “blame” in favour of “learning lessons” – but this was a spurious justification, since lessons without blame are partial lessons.

More importantly, a system without blame is an unaccountable system, and unaccountable systems are riskier systems. Unless the persons who are the sources of health risks are accountable for health risks, health risks will continue to move in the wrong direction.

Accountability should start with the government. If the Department of Health were to be made responsible for investigating the hundreds of thousands of complaints made against British health and social care per year, and were to be made accountable to Parliamentary committees for reducing health risks (currently, even the PHSO is

practically unaccountable to Parliament), our health risks would soon improve. Britons are dying for accountability.