How many patients are the private sector treating on behalf of the NHS?

After a quarter of a century of the internal market, John Appleby, Chief Economist at the King’s Fund, looks at the figures in The BMJ this week.

Hospital episode statistics show that over the seven years since 2006-7, the proportion of NHS inpatients patients treated by non-NHS providers has risen from around 0.5% (73,000) to 2.6% (471,000) of all inpatients (which totalled over 18 million in 2013-14).

For outpatient care, the proportion treated by non-NHS providers has risen faster - from 0.2% (123,000) to 5.5% (4.5 million).

In terms of the type of inpatient activity carried out by non-NHS providers, trauma and orthopaedics top the list at around one in eight episodes of care.

For inpatient work 88% of the market is covered by seven private providers, with Ramsay Health Care accounting for a quarter of all non-NHS provider inpatient episodes.

As a proportion of the NHS’s total secondary care activity, the contribution of the non-NHS sector has been and remains very small, writes Appleby. But it could grow.
“If rates of growth since 2006-7 continue over the next 20 years, non-NHS providers could account for one in five of all outpatient attendances and approaching one in ten inpatient episodes paid for by the NHS,” he explains. However, he warns that some of the actual growth in the non-NHS activity “will be due to better reporting rather than actual growth in work done.”

And even if non-NHS providers were to increase their share of NHS paid work, would this matter, he asks?

What matters for the quality of patient care and the efficiency with which it is delivered apply regardless of ownership, he concludes.

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