



Hunt says financial pressures on NHS are “worst ever”

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The financial pressures on the NHS are at their worst ever but the health service will balance its books by the end of this financial year, the health secretary has told MPs.

Jeremy Hunt appeared before the parliamentary health select committee on 15 September for an oral evidence inquiry session on the work of the health secretary.

In a wide ranging discussion MPs challenged Hunt on various topics including a seven day a week NHS, staff pay, efficiency savings, deficits, GP workload pressures, agency staffing costs, public health, social care, winter pressures, mental health, and staff morale.

In frank responses, Hunt acknowledged record pressures on NHS finances and said that staff morale was low, but he remained adamant that the government’s current policies were the right way to deal with these issues.

“The financial pressures on the NHS are the worst that they have ever been in its history,” he told the committee. He noted a “triple whammy” of an ageing population, government-wide financial pressure that prevented traditional funding rises for the NHS, and raised expectations among patients about access, quality, and standards of care.

“These are massive challenges, but we want the NHS to offer the safest and best quality healthcare anywhere in the world, and we are determined to do what it takes and I believe we can do that,” he said. “I believe that that journey has the support of NHS staff, but I don’t want to pretend it’s going to be easy.”

MPs asked him about predicted rising deficits among hospitals this year, but, given the surpluses made by commissioners, Hunt said, “I am confident that the NHS overall will balance its books by the end of the year.”

The health secretary went on to admit, “Morale is not good in the NHS at the moment. I think it is very, very tough on the front line. People are working very, very hard.”

Asked about the feasibility of £22bn (€30.2bn; \$34bn) of efficiency savings expected of the NHS by 2020, Hunt said, “We are going through the biggest exercise in the NHS’s history in terms of looking at where there are sensible places to make efficiencies.”

Quizzed about his speech on 16 July in which he spoke of his intention to force the NHS to change to provide a true seven day a week service and for a seven day rota for hospital consultants,¹ Hunt said that his department would soon publish a detailed plan.

“This will be a staged programme over the next four years so people will be able to see which parts of the country will pioneer the programme and where we will go from there,” he said. “There may be some upfront money that is needed to do that, but there is also a lot of evidence that there are efficiency savings to be made from offering truly seven day care.”

On the issue of how a seven day a week NHS would affect primary care, Hunt said that he expected practices to give patients the “opportunity” to access seven day services by 2020.

“What we are saying is that every practice needs to offer its patients the opportunity to have routine appointments 8 am to 8 pm in the week and over the weekend,” said Hunt. “But that might be at a neighbouring practice, it may be via Skype, or it might be through some federated arrangement.”

¹ Department of Health. Making healthcare more human centred and not system centred. 16 Jul 2015. www.gov.uk/government/speeches/making-healthcare-more-human-centred-and-not-system-centred.

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