Lies, damned lies, and waiting lists

Or lies, damned lies, and politicians

If there is one thing that the British distrust more than statistics it is politicians quoting statistics. How can Mrs Bottomley, the Minister for Health, tell the House of Commons on 4 July that "waiting times are tumbling" and yet eight weeks later Mr Cook, the opposition spokesman, announces that Labour's campaign will focus on "soaring waiting lists"? When Mr Waldegrave sat in the Department of Health on 19 September giving journalists the figures up to March 1991 Mr Cook was standing outside on the pavement quoting figures up to June. Later in the day loyal civil servants responded with the data for July. The public was then left to choose between the media's presentation of "tumbling Tories" and "soaring Socialists." Were one or both of them lying or simply being economical with the truth?

The NHS has gathered waiting list statistics since 1948, when it inherited half a million people awaiting surgical operations. For 27 years the returns simply counted how many people were waiting and said nothing about how long they waited. It was 1975 before an attempt was made to gather information about waiting time. The picture painted for England over the next 16 years is shown in the figure. There are several main features.

NHS waiting lists in England 1975-91 with figures for numbers waiting over 1 and 2 years for 1987-91 (dotted line shows management executive's target for eliminating all waits of over 2 years)

Firstly, inpatient waiting lists have increased over the 16 years from 500 000 to 700 000. Secondly, there are two humps in the rising trend—in March 1979 and in September 1982; both occurred at times of industrial action within the NHS. Thirdly, for most of the period about 25% of inpatients have waited over a year for admission. Every time the lists have been counted 150 000 and 200 000 people have been found to have been waiting for over a year. Fourthly, in March 1987 day cases were recorded for the first time. Once they were

added to the list the total number of patients jumped to 800 000 and has since grown to over 900 000. Fifthly, although the national waiting list initiative started in April 1987, the size of the waiting list has not fallen, but since March 1989 the number of patients waiting over a year has fallen. Finally, the provisional data released for July (which exclude information from special health authorities) suggest that total waiting lists continue to rise and that the rapid reduction in long waiting times reported in March has not continued.

When politicians look at this picture they have a habit of focusing on particular parts. Mr Cook is drawn to the top right hand corner and describes the landscape as soaring mountains, while Mr Waldegrave's eye settles on the tumbling waterfall in the bottom right hand corner. Both fail to convey the whole picture.

Certainly waiting lists in England are approaching one million, but that figure needs to be set against the fact that the NHS treats over 2.75 million patients from the waiting list each year. In theory one million people on the waiting list represents only four months' work; a waiting list of one million need not be very serious if the NHS could schedule waiting time more efficiently. Mr Cook, however, would argue that the larger the queue the longer the wait, but Mr Waldegrave can counter with the fact that, despite a growing list in the past two years, waiting times have reduced. If we magnify the bottom right hand corner of the picture we see that not only has the number of people waiting over one year been falling since March 1989 but so has the number waiting over two years.

It was this second reduction that encouraged the NHS Management Executive boldly to aim at eliminating all waits of over two years by March 1992. At the time the projection might have seemed reasonable, although some pointed out that if it took two years to reduce a list from 90 000 to 50 000 it might be difficult to make a further reduction of 50 000 in only one. Mr Waldegrave chose to back the management executive, and the government offered £35m to the NHS if it would ensure that nobody was waiting over two years by 31 March 1992.

After four months the number of patients waiting over two years has fallen to only 47 000. In effect the NHS has used only just over £2m of the £35m available. In the run up to a general election the NHS is caught between operating on patients waiting over two years and getting the money but at the risk of not spending on more urgent cases with shorter waits, or ignoring the government's policy and forfeiting millions of pounds.

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