

## [A free market in European healthcare?](#) [1]

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The European Commission has delayed making a controversial announcement which could see the state health plans of one Member State paying the costs of patients who opt to be treated in another EU country.

The idea of the plan was that British patients, say, could travel to Spain or Hungary for their treatment, as many do - with Britain's National Health Service picking up the tab. Part of the argument for this is that some countries have more efficient healthcare sectors, with shorter waiting times, for example, and EU citizens should be able to benefit from the competition between them. Following the case of Yvonne Watts, who had a hip operation in France and sent the bill to the NHS, Britain's High Court ruled that the NHS should pay for treatment abroad if patients otherwise had to wait too long. Quite right, I would say.

Already UK doctors are whingeing because they know that lots more people would indeed go abroad for treatment if the NHS was forced to pay for it, rather than put up with the sink service they get in the UK. The British Medical Association's Dr Vivienne Nathansan said that if people started travelling for operations there might 'not be enough need' for that treatment in the UK, which could lead to closures. Yes, well that's competition for you, Vivienne.

Meanwhile Nigel Edwards of the NHS Confederation complained that the EU plan was a stalking horse to create a 'free market' in European Healthcare. Oh, if only it were. We're talking about harmonizing state health plans here. If the EU actually created the conditions for a proper, open market in healthcare - one that wasn't dominated by doctors and politicians - I think we'd *all* be a lot fitter.

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