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Darzi's good idea [1]

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Here's an idea. Give patients in Britain's state-run National Health Service (NHS) their own healthcare budgets. Then they would be able to buy in the treatment they want, from whatever source they choose, rather than having to put up with the decisions of some distant central bureaucracy. Most patients, especially those with long-term conditions, know what kinds of treatment work best for them, so aren't they best placed to decide their own treatment regime anyway?

You might think this idea is just another rant from the swivel-eyed market zealots of the Adam Smith Institute. But no, it comes straight from Britain's government ? a Labour government. Health adviser and clinician Lord Darzi (pictured) wants tens of thousands of patients with diabetes, multiple sclerosis and motor neurone disease to get their own budgets.

I welcome this move. We've long believed that patients, or at least their family doctors, should be in charge of the money that is spent on patients ? and that politicians, the Department of Health, and local officials should not be. Then perhaps care might be delivered to serve the needs of patients, rather than for the convenience of bureaucrats. That was where the NHS was heading before it went up a lengthy statist siding under Health Secretary Frank Dobson MP in 1997. So awful was that experience that Labour reformers have been trying to get it back on track ever since. But of course, nobody can admit that Mrs Thatcher's GP-budgets policy was in fact on the right lines.

So, direction-changing as it is, the new initiative is as typically cautious and ? well, bureaucratic ? as you would expect from a highly centralist administration. It's limited to folk with these very long-term conditions. And they won't get cash to spend, nor anything like it ? a new voucher scheme is imagined. (And I can well imagine all the bureaucracy that will go along with that.) I really do wish that our leaders could simply admit that their former Health Secretary made a mistake, apologize for the billions of wasted taxpayers' money that has been thrown at trying to correct it, and agree that patient- or GP-centred budgeting is indeed the best direction of travel for UK healthcare. Don't you?

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