Patient patients? It seems not... [1]

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For ideological reasons, political reform of the NHS behemoth often seems impossible. Politicians across the spectrum, fearful to disturb the foundations upon which the NHS rests, hide behind platitudes, while MRSA haunts the hospital wards. However, cracks are increasingly showing in the system that no amount of political veneration can cover. The seeds of change are showing through, encouraged not from Westminster, but forced through by those that the NHS is supposed to be looking after: the people.

Earlier this week *The Times'* [3] Daniel Finkelstein, reported the disgraceful case of Colette Mills and Debbie Hirst, two cancer patients who have both been refused the use of the cancer drug Avastin alongside their NHS chemotherapy, even though they are willing to pay for it out of their own pocket. Avastin has been shown to help cancer sufferers, but has not been approved by NICE because it is not considered cost-effective enough to be available on the NHS.

So why have Colette Mills and Debbie Hirst not been permitted to use Avastin alongside their NHS treatment? It has nothing to do with the drug's efficacy? In fact, the reason has nothing to with the drug? Actually, it has nothing to with health. According the the health secretary, Alan Johnson, they were refused because: "That way lies the end of the founding principles of the NHS". But when 'principles' stop the sick from getting life-improving drugs, are they really principles worth defending?

It has been obvious for some time that Johnson?s 'principles' are outdated. Following last year?s report entitled *Free at the point of delivery: reality or political mirage* [4], it is was generally accepted that a secret top-up system already exists. Politicians have duly responded by sticking their collective heads in the sand, preferring this to facing up to modern realities. Colette Mills and Debbie Hirst, like others before them, are seeking justice through the courts. They are unlikely to be the last. It's time the NHS's unworkable 'principles' were replaced with a more flexible and customer focused system of health care, one truly fit for the 21st century.

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