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# Is the NHS really the kind of health service we want? [1]

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Half of Britain's family doctors, according to a survey this week [3], now believe that their patients should be charged to see them. Their workload, they complain, has become 'unmanageable', their waiting rooms clogged up by people who have very minor ailments and do not need to be there.

I write this from a car repair shop outside Cambridge. I had a problem with my car, so I called up yesterday and made an appointment, to suit my convenience, for 8am today. I rejected the offer of a courtesy car while mine was being looked at, but was invited instead to spend the intervening hour in their gleaming air-conditioned customer lounge and to help myself to coffee, tea, sandwiches, biscuits, fruit juice and lots more besides. So I have been reading the newspapers, watching the TV news, and I will shortly be sending this to the blog on the free customer wi-fi. Through the plate glass window I see the engineer plugging various computers onto my vehicle to find out exactly what is wrong. The fee for that hour of his time and all that customer service? £50 (including VAT). The difference between this and a doctor's waiting room could hardly be more stark. If I could pay a fee to get that kind of service from the NHS, I would be absolutely delighted.

Britain has a National Health Service that was constructed during the years of wartime austerity (which was real austerity, not the bogus 'austerity' we are told we are experiencing today), and it presumes that most of us are on the breadline. But there seems no shortage of people who, like me, are willing to pay £50 to sit in comfort while their car is fixed. Do we really think they would not pay £50 to get the health of their own body diagnosed? The first thing we need to do is to take the middle classes out of the free healthcare scam and focus our resources on people who genuinely can't afford a doctor.

As for them, just look round the world ? there are innumerable ways of making sure that people who cannot afford the full cost of medical care still get it. In France you pay, but get a rebate if you are on low income ? so you are aware of the cost, but do not suffer it. Other countries have insurance systems in which the state pays the premiums of the hardest-up. Britain's trouble is that nobody has the faintest clue how much medical care costs, so don't think about whether their sniffle is really worth the doctor's time and the taxpayers' cost.

I find myself visiting the doctor more, now that I have given up on the NHS and pay privately. Instead of fearing that I might be wasting the doctor's time on something minor, I know that the doctor is pleased to see me because I am a paying customer. It doesn't cost a huge amount, in fact ? nothing like the £150 charge that the NHS doctors survey worryingly suggests. But like the car showroom, I get seen immediately in pleasant surroundings and get treated as a valued customer by someone who is not overloaded and stressed out. Isn't that the sort of health service we want?

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[1] http://www.adamsmith.org/blog/healthcare/is-the-nhs-really-the-kind-of-health-service-we-want
[2] http://www.adamsmith.org/authors/dr-eamonn-butler
[3] http://www.express.co.uk/news/health/417591/Doctors-want-you-to-pay-150-for-an-appointment
[4] http://disqus.com/?ref_noscript
[5] http://disqus.com