

Governance, choice and the global market for mental health

Sir: In their guest editorial for the August issue of *International Psychiatry*, Philip Sugarman and Andrew Kakabadse (2011) make interesting observations on how to improve state healthcare through patient choice, and how to develop an attractive alternative to monopolised state provision. Understandably, their focus was on mental health. They point out that the independent sector has, in the UK, increasingly invested in mental healthcare homes and hospitals.

The sector I work in – secure care and highly specialised treatment for people with intellectual disabilities, many of whom have forensic backgrounds – has perhaps recorded one of the largest growth rates of independent-sector role provision and expertise in recent years.

The *13th Biennial Report* of the Mental Health Act Commission (2009) revealed that, in 1998, of individuals with an intellectual disability detained in hospitals, 15% were within the independent sector. This had grown to 46% of individuals (545 of 1184) by 2008. Moreover, in 2007/8 a total of 67 section 37 hospital orders were made (restricted and unrestricted), and 42 of these individuals were placed within the independent sector.

Collectively, the UK independent sector has immense knowledge of how best to provide tailor-made and highly specialist care to this complex patient group, and offers this expertise internationally.

However, as Sugarman and Kakabadse note, there are political ‘tensions’ between public and private UK providers which stifle collaboration and debate over what services best meet patient needs. These tensions have, in turn, led to the independent sector being consulted only at a superficial level about the development of services for this patient group. I believe we must continue to emphasise the message that, for both mental healthcare and intellectual disability, independent care is funded from the National Health Service (NHS) or Social Services, not by the individual receiving care. The independent sector works in clinical partnership with the NHS. This cooperative relationship represents an important component of market diversity.

Actively promoting this message will both help defuse political tensions and enable the public to understand more clearly how the independent sector can provide effective and high-quality services which are both overseen by the NHS and free to the individual at the point of service delivery.

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