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Stephen Hawking is my hero, but there is no evidence to support his claims about the NHS under the Conservatives

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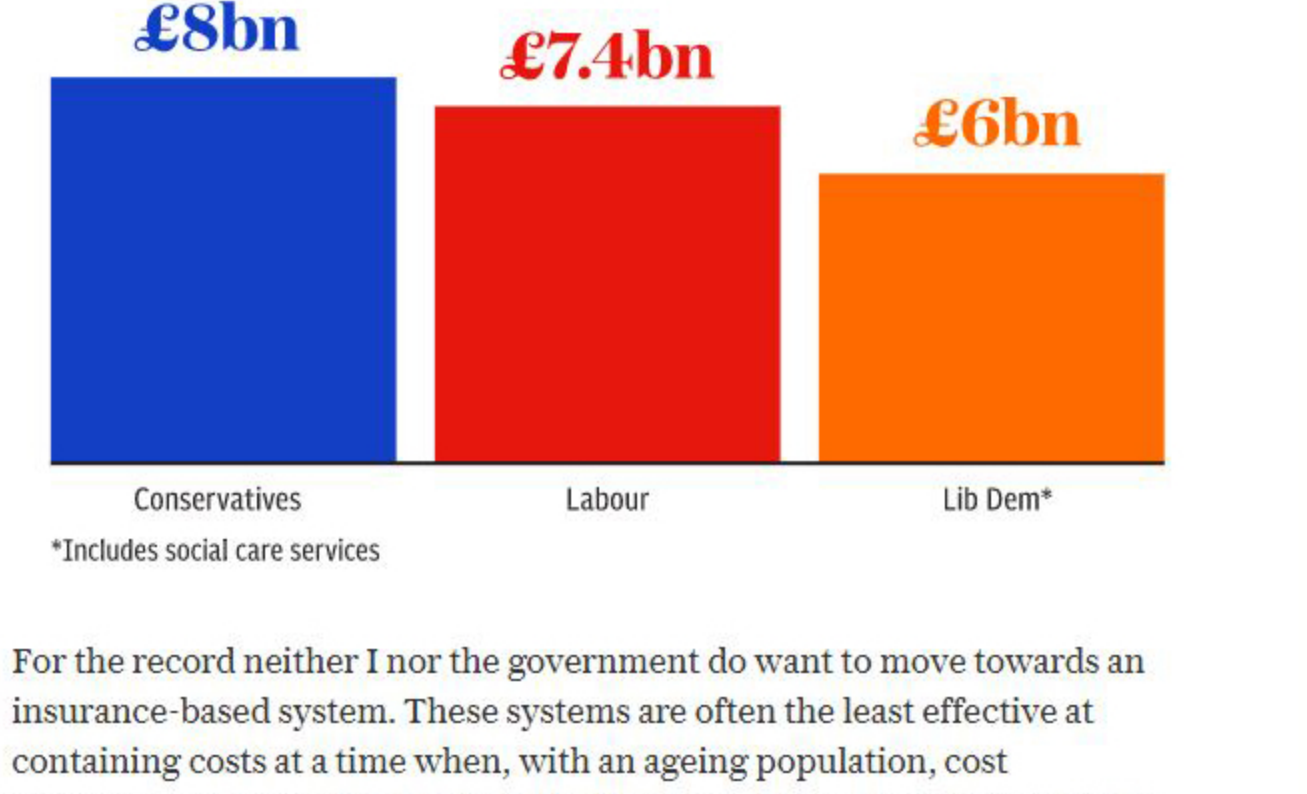
Jeremy Hunt responds to Stephen Hawking's attack on the Conservatives' management of the NHS

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Stephen Hawking is arguably our greatest living scientist. He is also a personal hero of mine. Who could not be overawed at the extraordinary contribution he has made to human knowledge despite his illness? Yes he is a very public Labour supporter, but that should be irrelevant to our respect for his genius.

But sadly yesterday someone who normally champions looking at the evidence made a series of claims about the NHS without any evidence at all. He talked about the "direction of change...towards a US-style insurance system." Since 2009, Labour's last full year in office, the number of people insuring themselves privately in the UK has actually fallen by 9.4 per cent or nearly three quarters of a million people. Far from progressing towards an insurance-based system the evidence suggests the opposite.

Even more seriously he implies we are moving away from universal health coverage. Yet only last month the Commonwealth Fund, an independent American think tank, rated the NHS as the fairest healthcare system in the world with the smallest differences in healthcare accessed by rich and poor of any major country (it also said we were the best). And as for use of the private sector, well last year it was 7.7 per cent of NHS spend - up just 0.1 per cent on the previous year. At that rate it will take another four centuries before the majority of NHS spend is sub-contracted to the private sector.



For the record neither I nor the government do want to move towards an insurance-based system. These systems are often the least effective at containing costs at a time when, with an ageing population, cost pressures are set to rise significantly. If you want to see how things can go wrong with insurance-based systems just look at our car insurance premiums.

Professor Hawking also alleged that I "cherry-picked" research on what is known as the "weekend effect" in hospitals during last year's junior doctors dispute. Researchers often disagree so you do have to make a judgement - and I based mine on the Fremantle study of 2015 because it was quite simply the most comprehensive and detailed paper ever done on the topic. No responsible health secretary could have ignored it, not least one wanting the NHS to be the safest healthcare system in the world.

Unfortunately the "cherry-picking" on this occasion was done by others not wanting to believe what every doctor in their heart knows to be true: we desperately need to improve the quality of care offered to those admitted at weekends.



We desperately need to improve the quality of care offered to those admitted at weekends CREDIT: DOMINIC LIPINSKI/PA WIRE

These messages aren't new - our policy has always been to push for higher standards whilst maintaining a universal system free at the point of use. So why is it so many on the Left put aside evidence-based thinking when it comes to health policy?

Health policy is probably the best example of cognitive dissonance in British politics today. Doesn't it make life easier if your reason for supporting Labour is because "the Tories want to destroy the NHS"? But wanting to believe something doesn't make it true - especially as it means ignoring record funding (above both the OECD and Western European average), record numbers of doctors and an NHS delivering more operations more safely than ever before in its history.

Labour may have set up the NHS in 1948 but to thrive today it is a Conservative vision that is needed. We need not just universal care but care that is universally good - which means focusing on standards as much as resources. It means asking difficult questions, not just about the "weekend effect" but about other patient safety issues such as wrong site operations (three a week), brain damaged babies (four a week) and avoidable deaths (potentially 150 a week).

If we want a thriving NHS in 100 years we will certainly need increased funding from a strong economy. But we will also need something else only Conservatives appear able to deliver: a relentless focus on making sure that the care we deliver is always as world-beating as the care Stephen Hawking has received.

Jeremy Hunt is the Secretary of State for Health