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Postcard From the NHS

Dr. Berwick's health-care model at work.

In 2007, 239 patients died of malnutrition in British hospitals, the latest year for which figures are available. A wag might say it must be the English cuisine. But the real roots of this tragedy lie in Britain's government-run medical system, which tells us something about what we might expect from ObamaCare in the years ahead.

A British charity, Age U.K., has been seeking for years to raise awareness of the issue. Yet despite increases in screening, training and inspection programs, the problem has only gotten worse. The charity reports that in 2007-2008 148,946 Britons entered hospitals suffering from malnutrition and 157,175 left in that state, meaning that hospitals released 8,229 people worse-off nutritionally than when they entered. In 2008-2009, that figure was up to 10,443.

The problem is not a lack of food. Hospital malnutrition mostly affects the elderly or otherwise frail, who often need individualized mealtime assistance. Spoon-feeding the elderly may not seem like the best use of a nurse's time, but for some it may literally be a matter of life and death. Yet the constant scarcities created by government medicine, along with the never-ending drive to trim costs, has led the National Health Service to give nurses additional responsibilities and powers in recent years. Inevitably, this leaves them with less time to make sure patients are getting fed.

Prime Minister David Cameron's new government was quick to blame these appalling outcomes on a decade of Labour party rule. But the basic problem is neither administrative nor budgetary: Funding for the NHS doubled between 1997 and 2007. The problem is that this is what happens in a single-payer health-care system, in which hospital administrators answer to the demands of politicians rather than patients.

Donald Berwick, President Obama's recess appointee to run Medicare and Medicaid, has described himself as "romantic about the NHS." Given what goes on in British hospitals, Dr. Berwick really is a romantic, though not in the sense he means.

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