



The International Trade Committee inquiry into UK-US trade relations NHS Partners Network Response

Background to NHS Partners Network

The NHS Partners Network (NHSPN), one of the NHS Confederation's hosted networks, is the trade association representing a wide range of independent sector providers of NHS clinical services, ranging through acute, diagnostic, clinical home healthcare, primary and community care and dentistry services. Our members are drawn from both the 'for profit' and 'not for profit' sectors and all are absolutely committed to working in partnership with the NHS and in accordance with the values set out in the NHS Constitution

The potential for a future UK/USA trade agreement to open up NHS procurement markets

Since its inception in 1948, the NHS has been supported by independent providers in the delivery of patient services, and this partnership was strengthened in 2000 when the NHS entered into a historic 'Concordat' with private and voluntary providers of care which sought to soften the traditional divide between the NHS and the private sector. As a result a dynamic domestic healthcare market has developed helping to increase overall provider capacity, reduce waiting times, invest capital and offer a greater choice of providers to patients.

However, despite the independent sector's important contribution to the NHS, there is currently no compulsory tendering in the health service - in the 18 month period to August 2014 only 5.5% of contracts in the NHS were awarded by competitive tender. Such a low amount of tendering, despite a diverse range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations now offering high quality NHS-funded health and care services to patients, indicates that commissioners are still tentative about testing the competence of alternative providers, despite the potential to improve outcomes for patients and deliver better value for money.

The NHS Partners Network recognises that procurement rules, largely stemming from the EU, have proved a contentious issue in recent years within the health service and NHS leaders have indicated that Brexit provides an opportunity to look again at these rules to ensure they are fit for purpose. While we recognise that procurement can sometimes be seen as a source of frustration, the principles which underpin it – ensuring best value for money, switching provider/supplier in order to secure the best possible patient care, procuring services in an open and transparent way – are all good principles and should guide any decisions around public procurement in future trade agreements.

Going forward, it is therefore important to ensure that NHS commissioners of health and care services are properly supported to deliver maximum value for patients, with a strong commitment from the Government that any future trade deal with the USA (or any other trading area) and subsequent changes to procurement law will adhere to the aforementioned principles of value for money, a level playing field for all providers, transparency and accountability. With a clear need to adapt NHS services in order to meet future challenges, such an approach will help commissioners of services to effect positive change to drive up standards in care, and make greater use of independent sector providers of NHS care who can contribute much needed capacity, capital and capability and help improve outcomes for NHS patients.



Recommendation

As part of any future trade deal with the USA, the Government must make a firm commitment that the NHS will maintain open, fair and transparent procurement policies to ensure maximum value for patients and taxpayers alike.

Contact

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