

England's health service faces damage from reforms

BRITAIN'S National Health Service will need another overhaul in five years if "damaging" changes being implemented by the government are allowed to continue, according to the editors of three UK healthcare publications. The Health and Social Care Bill, proposed by the Conservative-led coalition government, calls for "reforms designed and implemented so badly that another major NHS reform program is guaranteed within five years," the leaders of the British Medical Journal, the Health Service Journal and Nursing Times wrote in an editorial simultaneously published in all three publications. The bill, which applies only to England, would be the biggest shakeup in the history of the 64-year-old National Health Service. The legislation includes proposals aimed at expanding the number of private companies that offer healthcare services to NHS patients. It would also create an unspecified number of groups to commission services and create a national agency to take on duties now performed by regional trusts. Kieran Walshe, a professor of health policy and management at the Manchester Business School, wrote in the editorial that stopping the bill would save about £360 million by eliminating the need to set up new groups to manage the NHS and a regulator to oversee the changes,. It would also save about £650 million pounds a year needed to run the organisations. Walshe wrote that the government could argue that, in the special economic circumstances of the day, it made sense to drop the bill and they would also neutralise an issue which has become increasingly politically toxic. The legislation is going through the House of Lords, and any amendments made there would have to be approved by the House of Commons before the bill is submitted for royal assent. Parts of the government's plan, including increased competition, greater choice for patients and more involvement by general practitioners in commissioning treatment, could be accomplished under existing rules, Walshe wrote.

Kristen Hallam: Bloomberg, 30 January 2012