

Dear _____ MP

I am writing as one of your constituents with great concern at the apparent failure of the government to monitor whether patient safety is at risk in independent sector treatment centres (ISTCs) – the private clinics forced on the NHS as part of the government's commercialisation agenda.

The BBC's Panorama program of 30 September uncovered shocking evidence of three men who had died as a result of gall bladder surgery and another death in North West England, all in ISTCs. The program can be viewed at this link:
http://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/b00n462s/Panorama_Dying_to_Be_Treated/

This is worrying enough, but these tragic cases cast doubt about whether the government is adequately ensuring that ISTCs are safe for patients. In an interview for the program the health minister Mike O'Brian made the astonishing claim that the government does not monitor death rates in private treatment centres in order to cut bureaucracy.

He said: "We have sought to reduce bureaucracy and that has a price. That price is that all the statistics that we previously easily got aren't necessarily flowing in at the same rate because we're spending more money on doctors and nurses than we are on the people who collect statistics."

This is deeply misleading. In fact full statistics for ISTCs have never been made public because of the curtain of commercial confidentiality, and conversely it is not true that the NHS has stopped collecting statistics on its own death rates. Cutting bureaucracy cannot be used as an excuse for compromising safety – death rates are not an incidental statistic but a fundamental piece of information.

As my MP I would be very grateful if you would apply pressure through parliamentary questions and other channels for information pertaining to ISTCs to be made public. In the interests of safety, the government must publish the mortality and morbidity rates in all ISTCs, both death rates and cases where operations have gone wrong, so that a fair comparison can be made between the relative safety of ISTCs and NHS hospitals.

If Mike O'Brian is right and this information is not kept, it is essential for the government to launch an urgent and open review of safety in ISTCs. Failing that, the health select committee must act.

The government is consistent about its commitment to patient choice. How are patients to make an informed choice if they are unable to assess even basic safety levels when deciding whether to be treated in an ISTC?

I look forward to your reply and would be very grateful for your efforts.

Yours sincerely,