Response to the new plans to inject massive resources into the NHS has been cynical. Relentless exaggeration and propaganda have eroded public trust in official communications, so that even simple factual messages (such as MMR safety) are disbelieved. A new systems analysis by Andras and Charlton* suggests that hype and spin are more than just an irritation. Public relations technologies insulate the health service from informed and effective public regulation, and create a ‘democratic deficit’. Restoring honesty to the health service requires radical structural reforms to reduce central political control and divide the organisation into more locally responsive units.

- New Labour has announced plans to improve the NHS by means of a massive injection of public funding - yet public response has been sceptical. People suspect that increased resources will be wasted on increased administration and ‘initiatives’ that make for good ‘soundbites’. Public trust in NHS policy pronouncements has been profoundly eroded by ever greater use of hype and spin. Now, people cannot tell the difference between propaganda and facts - they are suspicious even of accurate official information such as the safety of the MMR immunization.

- Andras and Charlton have applied systems analysis to the structure of the NHS and the nature of information processing in the health care system. Results suggest that the gap between statements of official propaganda and the personally experienced reality of health services created a ‘democratic deficit’. The use of public relations technologies has gone into positive feedback to generate ‘communication hyper-inflation’. Because organizations compete in exaggeration and distortion, their public communications now act as signals with zero informational content.

- A publicly responsible health service depends on reliable information, but monolithic, centralized and politically-dominated organizations such as the NHS are not open to corrective forces. One radical solution is to divide the NHS into smaller units which could operate in real markets, and become more responsive to the preferences of health service users - such preferences include reliable information. Hype and spin will be controlled only when a reformed system rewards honest communication and punishes misleading soundbites.


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