

Jan O'Sullivan T.D.
Spokesperson on Health, Labour Party
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The Labour Party has been advocating a single-tier Health Service financed through Universal Health Insurance since the publication of our substantive policy document 'Our Good Health' in 2002.

The current 3-tier system is abhorrent to the principles on which the Party is founded, particularly those of equality and solidarity. We believe that people should have access to Healthcare on the basis of need not ability to pay and, along with education and housing, health is one of the areas where the society and the state has an obligation to provide security for all its citizens.

The single-tier system proposed by the Labour Party represents a levelling up rather than a levelling down so that freedom of choice and prompt treatment will be available for all. It will include free primary care and hospital treatment. The model we proposed in 2002 was based on people having a choice of insurer with the state taking responsibility for paying for those with lower incomes while those above a certain income threshold would pay their own insurance while approximately 20% of the population in the middle would get assistance with payment on a sliding scale.

The model presented by the Labour Party is set in the context of promoting a healthy society rather than developing an illness industry. We believe that all aspects of a person's life contribute to their health and people should have as much control over their own treatment as possible. We also believe that there has to be a strong commitment to primary care and that community based centres of wellness should be the focal point for an integrated service that would keep as many people as possible out of acute hospitals. Those who care in the community and the home must be valued and supported.

Mental Health is as important as Physical Health and needs to be part of an integrated service and appropriately funded.

Many things have changed since 2002 but we remain strongly committed to Universal Health Insurance. We are reviewing our policy to take account of the changes including the establishment of the HSE and the growing privatisation under Minister Harney to which Labour is opposed. We want to restore the 'not for profit' ethos that previously pertained in the Health Service in Ireland. If we retain the model of multiple insurers they must be strictly regulated and there must be a mechanism in place to encourage 'not for profit' insurers and the VHI must not be privatised.

The Social Insurance model which has been explored in detail by the Adelaide Hospital Society is a valid alternative which has low administrative costs and which is successful in many EU countries.

A change of system is urgent both for reasons of equality and efficiency. The Labour Party costed its proposals in 2002, including the cost of the extra beds and Health professionals that would be needed to build up the capacity of the service. At that time we estimated that spending on Health would have to go up from £5 billion per annum to £7 billion.

Current public spending on Health is €16 billion with an estimated €4 billion more in private spending. This, more than anything else, shows that putting extra money into a bad system brings very poor results. Allowing for inflation and converting pounds to euros, we are still spending a lot more now than what we estimated could deliver an excellent and equal service. It shows the urgent needs for fundamental change.

The overall structure which the Labour Party would put in place would restore political responsibility to the Minister for Health, reducing the power and the management layers of the HSE. We would decentralise decision-making, where appropriate as close to the patient as possible and set up a Health Service Ombudsman.

There is broad agreement amongst most political parties; many health professionals and representative bodies and a growing number of citizens, that Ireland must change its hybrid, unequal and highly inefficient Health system. The more debate there is on this vital issue in advance of the next General Election the better so that we can establish a system in which people will have faith.