



COCK & BULL

HEALTH PROBLEMS

The debate over healthcare in the US has led to frenzied and often bizarre criticism of Britain's National Health Service.

Why are the Americans so interested in our health?

President Barack Obama is a fan of universal healthcare and wants to move the US system in that direction, but critics of his plan have been trawling the British press for examples of how our “socialised medicine” is a cruel and unusual crime against humanity.

Obama wants to give everyone free healthcare?

That's right.

Like every other civilised country in the world?

Right again.

And people are angry about this? What's their beef?

Sarah Palin says that government-run healthcare leads to state “death panels” run by bureaucrats who decide who gets to live and who doesn't.

That sounds terrifying. Is she right?

Kind of. The NHS does ration healthcare. As a government-run service it limits the procedures, tests and medicines that patients get for free. In some cases this can mean denying expensive treatment to patients with limited chances of surviving, or denying expensive tests to people who are not at high risk for the underlying condition.

But there are some people in America with no access to healthcare, right?

Right. There are 46.3 million Americans without health insurance coverage, according to the US Census Bureau. Many of them, perhaps as much as 15 million, are uninsured because they cannot afford coverage and are ineligible for the government's existing schemes, Medicare and Medicaid.

Hang on. They already have government-run health insurance?

Yes. Medicare and Medicaid have multi-billion dollar budgets to provide healthcare to the poor and the elderly.

So Palin's death panels are already up and running?

Yes, but they're only for poor people at the moment. Obama wants death panels for everyone.

Don't private insurers have death panels too?

Well, insurers do deny claims, of course. A recent study sponsored by a Californian nursing organisation found that, between 2002 and 2009, insurers denied one in five claims. That's how they make money.

Hmm. So it's really a question of whether you prefer

your death panels to be run by the government or by the private sector?

It's an ideological conundrum – except for sane people. After all, the British system allows people to have it both ways; if the government death panel denies your prostate exam, you can always pay for the pleasure.

I'll take my chances. So, which system provides better healthcare?

Who knows? Some people argue that Americans' relatively poor life expectancy suggests they are being failed by their healthcare system, but longevity is not a good measure of that. There are other reasons why Americans die younger.

Because they serve food in buckets?

Obesity is certainly a big part of it. Americans also spend much more time driving, which is one of the riskiest activities in the world.

Don't all our footballers go to America to have their knees fixed?

American healthcare must be better...

It's certainly true that America is a healthcare pioneer and that it attracts patients from around the world for cutting-edge treatments and surgeries. However, the question is not whether America has the best healthcare in the world – it probably does – but whether it has the best access to healthcare in the world.

But is it the private-insurer system that encourages all that innovation?

Perhaps, but there's very little evidence to show that Americans survive illness any better than other people because of it. The medical innovations might be good for footballers' knees and Dick Cheney's heart, but they don't seem to make much difference to the population's overall health.

So we're happy with our government death panels, right?

Well, there's always room for improvement, but the greatest benefit of the British system is that it provides a decent level of healthcare while also allowing ample opportunity for whining and moaning.

You should run for office.

I don't run for anyone. Pass the ketchup.

