

UNISON remainEU

The EU and the NHS – healthier IN

On 23 June the people of the UK will take part in a referendum that will determine whether or not we remain in or leave the European Union (EU).

UNISON has weighed up the evidence and arguments and concluded that to leave would put the NHS at significant risk (other fact sheets in this series highlight the implications of leaving the EU for workers' rights, the economy and public services.)

This is not to suggest that UNISON is an uncritical supporter of the EU. Far from it. But in addition to supporting the remain position on the grounds that to leave would put the economy, public services and our rights at work at risk, UNISON also believes that a more socially just world economy is best secured through working alongside sister unions within the EU.

What are the risks to the NHS of the UK leaving the EU?

- Brexit would damage the UK economy, meaning less money for public services such as the NHS.
- The NHS is dependent on EU migrants helping to fill staff shortages in areas such as nursing and across the wider health workforce. 10% of NHS and social care professionals come from other European countries.
- The loss of EU funding would affect areas such as cancer research and could mean that British people fail to benefit at the earliest opportunity from the best medicines.
- The health of the population could also suffer as the EU provides important coordination in areas such as tackling pandemics and promoting the use of sustainable healthy food.
- Brexit would provide no protection against trade deals such as the TTIP treaty – and would actually make matters worse for the NHS.

Brexit supporters are wrong about the benefits of leaving for the NHS

Supporters of Brexit claim that money that goes to the EU could be better spent on the NHS. Others have claimed that Brexit would allow the NHS to avoid being affected by the controversial Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) deal between the EU and the USA.

So would leaving the EU lead to more money being spent on the NHS?

No. Every day we see how a weaker economy has led to cuts in public spending, with a severe impact on public services such as the NHS. The economic damage caused by Brexit would hit tax revenue, wiping out at a stroke any saving the UK made from not paying into EU budget. So there would be less money for the NHS, not more.

Would leaving the EU give us more control over how we organised our own NHS?

No. The EU does not tell the UK government how to run the NHS. Some EU rules affect the way in which the NHS can be run, but those rules are interpreted in ways which respect national decisions about how health systems are organised and the values they embody.

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Would a Brexit protect the NHS from privatisation?

No. We have already seen how austerity has been used to promote privatisation in the NHS and other public services. With the anticipated impact on the UK economy of a Brexit, this excuse would embolden the current government to go even further. Most commentators expect a Brexit to lead to a change of leadership in the Conservative party and those at the front of the queue, such as Boris Johnson, are no friends of a publicly provided NHS, having stood idly by while the Coalition government brought about the hated Health and Social Care Act. Other leading figures in the Leave campaign – such as Michael Gove, Nigel Farage, Aaron Banks, Daniel Hannan and Douglas Carswell – have a track record of supporting greater privatisation.

Would Brexit safeguard the NHS from TTIP?

UNISON has been an outspoken critic of TTIP from the beginning, including its potential impact on the NHS. However, outside the EU the UK would simply face the prospect of even worse trade deals, with much less voice to influence them. Post-Brexit the UK would seek a free trade deal with the US, which would bring about the same problems as are currently found in TTIP. In many ways the real danger in TTIP comes from the way in which our own government has chosen to approach it. Regrettably, the UK government has continually pushed the deal further towards its current pro-privatisation form. Other countries, such as France, have adopted a different stance, and a number of countries have negotiated protections for their own healthcare services – something the UK government has failed to do.

What does the EU do for our health?

Europe does much to help the UK NHS and the wider health of the population. Collective public health research across the EU has helped tackle problems such as alcohol abuse, tobacco addiction and now obesity – major issues that cost the NHS billions every year. Other EU environmental and public health policies help the UK to be prepared to deal with the spread of infectious disease or pandemics. Support networks between EU members have aided UK research and healthcare leaders fear what would happen to these relationships in the event of an EU exit. Scientists fear that essential work, such as life-saving cancer research, could be affected by the loss of these networks. Similarly, there are warnings about the impact of Brexit on the ability of UK patients to benefit at the earliest opportunity from the best medicines, as EU funding helps get the most effective drugs produced more quickly.

Get involved in UNISON's Remain Campaign

- UNISON activists and members have a vital role to play in the campaign. Find out more from the campaign web pages <https://www.unison.org.uk/our-campaigns/eu-referendum-23-june/>
- Talk with your branch about what you can do to highlight the risks to public services, workers rights, the economy and the NHS if the UK leaves the EU.