

Boutique care for the royal baby, substandard medicine for everyone else

By: Michael Tanner, a Senior Fellow at the Cato Institute

July 22, 2013

As the United Kingdom – and a sizeable swath of the rest of the world – celebrates the birth of the new Prince of Cambridge, it is impossible not to notice that the former Kate Middleton, Duchess of Cambridge and wife of Prince William, received rather better health care than the average Briton.

The duchess had her baby in the Lindo Wing of St. Mary's Hospital, a private facility so posh that it has its own wine list. The duchess' suite costs roughly £6,265 (\$9,600) per night, and comes with individual birthing rooms and a birthing pool. Each room has satellite TV, radio, internet access, daily newspapers and a safe. But while the royal family will be able to sip champagne to celebrate the birth, most of her countrywomen will be giving birth in a system that provides substandard care.

After a scandal in which several NHS hospitals reportedly covered up maternity deaths, an internal NHS report this year pointed to as many as 13,000 needless deaths in 14 NHS hospital trusts since 2005. Those deaths were not all maternity-related, but they provide clear evidence of the ongoing problems besetting Britain's government-run health care system.

The NHS also continues to be beset by long waiting lists for many types of treatment. In fact, according to a report last year by the Patients Association, a British watchdog group, waiting times have increased by six percent since 2010, and more patients are having to forgo some elective procedures altogether. Another report concluded that the number of patients waiting more than 18 weeks for hospital admission after being referred by their GP increased by nine percent from 2011 to 2012, to more than 155,000 Britons. More than 3,500 Britons were reported to be waiting for more than a year, a five percent increase. Worse, this qualifies as an improvement, given even larger increases in wait times in 2010.

“[P]atients are waiting longer in certain trusts to receive the treatment that they require and that fewer patients are getting the operations they need,” warns Norman Williams, president of the Royal College of Surgeons of England.

And Britain continues to rank near the bottom for many health outcomes such as cancer survival rates, below other European countries, and far below the United States. And, a few months ago the British medical journal *The Lancet* found that almost 2,000 British children a year die from ‘avoidable’ causes because family doctors lack training in pediatric care, putting the United Kingdom second to last among European nations.

Britain spends much less than the United States on health care, a fact frequently trumpeted by advocates of government-run health care. But those savings come at a considerable cost for patients.

It is unlikely that the new little prince will face any of those problems.