



## Offline: The UK's child health emergency



Gerti Deutsch/Contributor/Getty Images

Last week, Britain celebrated the 70th anniversary of the National Health Service (NHS). It was hard to understand why. Some of the most reliable assessments of health systems come from the Institute for Health Metrics and Evaluation, based at the University of Washington in Seattle. Its Universal Health Coverage Index, which measures nine tracer interventions, together with risk-standardised death rates for 32 causes of death, last year placed the UK 19th out of 22 countries in western Europe. The health systems of Finland, Iceland, Switzerland, Norway, Sweden, Luxembourg, Spain, the Netherlands, Austria, Andorra, Italy, France, Ireland, Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Greece, and Cyprus all outperformed the UK. Another metric, the Healthcare Access and Quality Index, quantifies access to and the quality of personal health-care services. The UK came 23rd out of 195 nations. Most of the countries just cited beat the UK. So what exactly were we celebrating last week? Mediocrity.



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July 5, 1948, was also an important day for children's health. The many civilian deaths during World War 2 left a large number of children under the responsibility of local authorities. In 1945, two foster parents, Reginald and Esther Gough, killed a 12-year-old child who had been transferred to their care by Newport County Borough Council. The boy's name was Dennis O'Neill. His death shocked the nation. Parliamentary inquiries followed. The care of children by public authorities was heavily criticised. The outcome was the Children Act of 1948, passed on the same day the NHS came into being. The Children Act unified ministerial responsibilities for child care. It required local authorities to create departments with specific responsibilities for children. Each local authority had a Children's Committee with a trained Children's Officer. The aim of the Act was to meet the developmental needs of children. It was a landmark piece of legislation and illustrates how the evolution of the NHS has gone hand-in-hand with our deeper appreciation of the importance of children in our society. (The fate of Dennis O'Neill was the basis for a 1947 radio play by Agatha Christie called *Three Blind Mice*. Christie turned that play into *The Mousetrap*, which has been running



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in London since 1952. The historical trace of our deeper appreciation for children in our society is replayed and remembered every night in the West End.)

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That era of concern for children is over. In October, 2017, the Office for National Statistics (ONS) reported that the UK had dropped several ranks in the European Union league table of child mortality. In 1990, the UK ranked seventh in Europe for neonatal mortality. By 2015, the UK had fallen to 19th place. For under-5 mortality, the UK was ninth in the European Union in 1990. Today, we are 19th. In March, 2018, the ONS reported rises in neonatal and infant mortality rates for England and Wales. Last week, the Children's Commissioner, Anne Longfield, published her annual study of childhood vulnerability in England. She estimated that 2.7 million children are currently living with health-related vulnerabilities. Instead of celebrating the glories of the NHS, we should be angry that our country is so appallingly neglecting its children and young people. The current debate about the NHS is almost entirely focused on money. Money is certainly part of the problem. But it is not the only problem. And it may not be the most important problem facing the NHS. For children, for example, the hierarchical referral model of primary to secondary care is increasingly inefficient and ineffective. Instead, we need to devise and test new models of care that put generalist and specialist teams working together in communities. We need to upgrade the quality of our workforce. We need to stop thinking about the NHS as a cost. It is an investment in our future economy. We need to focus on prevention, through attention to preconception care, early child development, and adolescent health. And we need to do more to integrate paediatric care with public health. 30% of all children in Britain today (4.1 million) live in poverty. The UK is facing nothing less than a national emergency regarding the health of its children and young people. This emergency is a scar on the moral body of our country. Who will take responsibility for addressing it? So far, silence from the medical community. Shame on us.

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