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It's time Britain stopped funding the incompetent, nannyng World

# Health Organisation

The intergovernmental body has been mired in controversy for years. Taxpayer money would be much better spent treating patients here

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**JOHN O'CONNELL**

CHIEF EXECUTIVE OF THE TAXPAYERS' ALLIANCE

31 August 2023 • 4:05pm

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**E**very new set of healthcare data seems to be worse than the last. Today, it was suggested hospital waiting lists deaths may have doubled in five years. Despite the Prime Minister pledging to reduce the backlog, since the start of the year numbers have risen by 360,000.

There are problems everywhere you look, and little in the way of low hanging fruit. But perhaps this is one option: stop funding the World Health Organisation, and divert that money towards treating patients here. Last year, we handed over £140 million to the intergovernmental body in voluntary contributions, which could have paid the basic salary of 3,772 nurses. It could have funded 24,000 hip replacements, at a time when 800,000 people are on the waiting list for “trauma and orthopaedics”.

Our voluntary contributions to this agency have been in the hundreds of millions since 2009, with the UK the only state that has been among the top three donors for 15 years running. Our total contributions since 2008 add up to £2.5 billion. Over the same period, the United States has donated around 50pc more, despite having an economy eight times larger than our own. Healthcare outcomes in Britain have been on a downward trajectory, lagging by international standards, while taxpayers are stumping up vast sums to fund an organisation which recently asked North Korea to sit on its Executive Board.

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For years, the WHO has made unforced errors and sparked controversy. In May, soon after publishing a report claiming artificial sweeteners do not help people lose weight and may cause cancer, it then clarified that aspartame would only be carcinogenic if you drank the equivalent of nine to 14 cans of Diet Coke every day. And there was panic earlier this year that its Pandemic Preparedness Treaty could somehow allow the body to enforce lockdowns and travel bans.

A functioning intergovernmental health organisation could serve an important purpose – say, in the event of a global epidemic that would require coordination between nations across the globe. Its Covid-19 story, however, was one of dismal failure. The WHO advised countries against travel restrictions after it became clear they were essential. It suggested, as late as February 2020, that the stigma might be worse than the disease, and at one point its Director General applauded China’s “commitment to transparency”. The idealistic vision of a multilateral world in which autocratic states are opened up by norm-enforcing global quangos has proven to be a chimaera.

Well-meaning people may believe that contributions to the WHO are a form of global philanthropy, but its best days have long since passed. Since it helped rid the world of smallpox in the 1970s, newer organisations like Gavi (formerly the Global Alliance for Vaccines and Immunisations) have superseded the WHO in dealing with specific health problems. The WHO is instead increasingly becoming a global nanny, dealing with lifestyle issues, funded in part by the British Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. Its Twitter account recently praised the benefits of homoeopathy and naturopathy.

With that in mind, its response to urgent health emergencies was entirely predictable. It bungled the Swine Flu and Ebola. After failing to warn the world of the dangers of Ebola in west Africa, 20 experts convened by the Harvard Global Health Institute and the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine argued it should be stripped of its role in declaring disease outbreaks an international emergency.

The British economy is in a tailspin. As inflation comes down, the risk of recession goes up. Taxes are set to hit 70-year highs. More and more money is being poured into the NHS, with the quip that we are becoming a healthcare service with a government attached becoming truer by the day, yet staff productivity has stagnated, doctors are striking, patients are suffering. Money alone will not fix the NHS, but the UK nonetheless stands to gain from redirecting WHO funding (currently from the Foreign Office budget) towards reducing the backlog. The Government should give up on global virtue signalling, and focus on world-leading healthcare.

Why hasn't it? Too many politicians succumb to the lure of handing over decision-making to an external body with apparent expertise. It allows them to claim to be "taking the politics out of" an issue and, if it goes wrong, they can avoid blame. Quangos now dominate the policy landscape, taking power away from elected representatives and handing it to unaccountable bureaucrats. Domestically, the result is catastrophic: an 70-seat majority doesn't feel like a mandate. Even Tony Blair found the state machine too obstructive to push through planned reforms. But the cadre of international quangos have become an equally pernicious force. The World Health Organisation (WHO) is one of a number of such institutions to which we send extraordinary amounts of taxpayers' money. It's time to ask if we should leave.

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*John O'Connell is chief executive of the TaxPayers' Alliance*

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