

# A dose of Project Fear

*CIB chairman Edward Spalton examines claims that a no-deal Brexit could lead to medicines shortages. Shortages already exist, but they are nothing to do with Brexit. Rather, they are artificially manufactured by large pharmaceutical companies, a practice that has been ongoing for many years. The claims that Brexit could add to these shortages defy all logic.*

My local pharmacy has had the following poster displayed in its window for the past few weeks.



Is this Project Fear? Almost certainly not.

It turns out that pharmacists and the NHS have had to deal with drug shortages for many years. This is nothing new, and it has nothing to do with Brexit.

It is common knowledge in the pharmaceutical sector that there are periodic shortages of some medicines. None of them are Brexit-related: it is a phenomenon that has been ongoing for at least a decade. A practising pharmacist has explained how the large drug companies regularly manipulate NHS procurement policies, causing intermittent shortages and price hikes.

This happens in other EU countries too. Germany's *Bild* newspaper reported only recently: "Painkillers, antibiotics and cancer medicines: Across the country there are ever more frequent shortages of important medicines."

Pharmacists, of course, bear the brunt of complaints from anxious patients, so it's not surprising they have a notice ready to deflect the complaints where they belong.

The National Audit Office put out a report a couple of weeks ago on 'Exiting the EU: supplying the health and social care sectors'. It's hard to know if the parts of the report stating that "there remains a significant amount to do before 31 October" are an attempt to create Brexit-anxiety; it might just be a case of different groups of civil servants each covering their own backs.

But unsurprisingly, the anti-Brexit press ignored all the parts of the reports that detailed all the contingency plans now in place, and homed in any negatives they could find. Here is how *The Times* reported it:

*"Patients risk missing out on medicines under a no-deal Brexit as ferries bringing in emergency supplies could be a month late, the spending watchdog has warned. The National Audit Office said the Department for Transport only aimed to have its plans for emergency freight capacity entirely up and running by November 30th, a month after the Brexit date."*

What *The Times* fails to mention is that the NAO's consideration of medicines being held up by delays at the ports is a 'reasonable worst case scenario'. Let us recall Dr Lee Rotherham's warning that a 'reasonable worst case scenario' is not something that's likely to happen but rather the opposite: something that's unlikely but nevertheless possible, and therefore something we need to have contingency plans for 'just in case'.

Interestingly, the Irish Pharmaceutical Healthcare Association says that there is no need to stockpile medication in Ireland. They say there is no danger of shortages despite the fact that over two-thirds of supplies come from or through the UK (hat tip to our academic friends at Briefings for Brexit for spotting this).

The Irish position should not surprise us. The mundane reality

is that in a worst case scenario, a large cargo aircraft could easily bypass any delays at the channel ports with a huge payload. Because medicines are high value items, the extra cost per packet would be minimal.

Perhaps the media need to stop trying to conjure up the spectre of Brexit-related shortages that a moment's reflection show will not happen, and instead investigate the all-too-real shortages artificially manufactured by pharmaceutical companies that NHS patients have had to suffer for years?