Andrew Marr: For a lot of voters the central issue in this election campaign is the condition of our most loved institution, the National Health Service. But these have not been easy years for the NHS or those working in it, and the Health Secretary in England may have his work cut out explaining why its future will be brighter under the Tories. He’s with me now.

Jeremy Hunt: Good morning.

Andrew Marr: Morning. We tend to bandy numbers a lot in these conversations. Let me start with a very simple question, which is if I wake up in the middle of the night and I’ve got some pain inside me and I’m rushed to A&E, how soon should I be seen?

Jeremy Hunt: Well, the standard says that you should be seen within four hours, not just seen but also treated and either discharged home or admitted to hospital.

Andrew Marr: When was the last time the NHS in England hit that target?

Jeremy Hunt: Well, we haven’t hit it for over two years. It’s not acceptable. We have a plan to get back to that standard. But it’s also-

Andrew Marr: So if people vote Conservative can they expect you back on that standard, hitting that standard after the election, and if so, why?

Jeremy Hunt: Well, I think, with respect, you’ve got to look at what’s actually happening in A&E departments, which is, -
Andrew Marr: - Longer waits.

Jeremy Hunt: - which is despite the huge pressure of an ageing population, half a million more over 75s since 2010, we are actually seeing within that crucial four hour standard more than 2,000 people every single day – actually being seen within the standard. Now, demand has gone up by faster than that, which is why we’re investing in more doctors, more nurses, we’re putting in more funding than ever before. And yes, I’m absolutely saying that we have said we intend to get back to that standard next year, and it’s very, very important that we do so.

Andrew Marr: Because another good example of how the NHS is performing or not performing is the 18-week rule, which is that again if I’m in a GP’s surgery, he said, ‘I’m terribly sorry, Mr Marr, there’s something serious happening to you, you have to go into hospital for an operation or some kind of procedure, I will be seen within 18 – I’ll be there with 18 weeks. And again can you remind us how many people are not seen within 18 weeks at the moment?

Jeremy Hunt: Well, the standard is 92 per cent and currently we are on 90 per cent. But if I may say, you are –

Andrew Marr: In terms of people not being seen, that’s how many?

Jeremy Hunt: That’s a significant number. But let me just say you’ve picked two examples, I don’t think that is a fair reflection of the performance of the NHS. No, this is important. Just before the election was called, at the end of March, the NHS published an independent report in which they said that if you take most major conditions, heart attack, stroke, cancer and so on, outcomes have dramatically improved over the last five years. The
example they gave was cancer, where they said that 7,000 people are alive today who wouldn’t have been alive if we’d kept with the cancer survival rates of 2012. And I think people watching this programme, there will be thousands and thousands who will say they’ve had a good NHS experience. They recognise the pressures on the NHS, the pressures on some of those crucial standards, which we are absolutely committed to getting right. But they can also see that there are more doctors, more nurses, more funding than ever before.

Andrew Marr: Nobody is saying, and I’m certainly not saying, that nothing is going well in the NHS. Not saying that at all. But those are both two rules that you set yourself, the four week rule and the 18 week – the four hour and the 18 week rule, to be judged by, and you have failed on both of them. 370,000 people are now not seen within 18 weeks and that number is going up very fast. 100,000 in the last year alone.

Jeremy Hunt: Well, they are very, very important standards, but they aren’t the only standards. And let me tell you another –

Andrew Marr: But they’re important to the humane working of the NHS.

Jeremy Hunt: Absolutely. But so is making sure that we don’t have a repeat of what happened at Mid-Staffs, and if you look at what’s happened since 2010 every day in the NHS we’re doing about 5,000 more operations. But the number of patients being harmed, the proportion being harmed with things like blood clots, avoidable falls, pressure ulcers and so on is down by eight per cent, despite a huge increase in activity. So I think there’s fantastic things happening in the NHS. And I think it’s very important that people like you focus on the bigger picture.
Andrew Marr: I do understand that there are good things as well as bad things. But here is the Royal College of Physicians saying, ‘our NHS is underfunded, under-doctored and overstretched. Patients are waiting longer, on lists, on trolleys, in emergency departments and in their homes for the care they need. An increasing number of people, although clinically ready to go home cannot safely leave hospital as the care system is unable to cope. People’s lives are being put at risk. That’s the Royal College of Physicians, that’s not the BBC or anybody else. It’s a very, very serious assessment of where the NHS is under Jeremy Hunt.

Jeremy Hunt: And what has Jeremy Hunt and what has this government been doing about that? Because I agree we need more doctors, and since I’ve been Health Secretary we’ve actually got six and a half thousand more doctors, we’ve got 15,000 more nurses, and on the funding issue – I think this is the really crucial – okay, well let’s talk about that for a moment. So we did have a very difficult period straight after 2010, after the financial collapse. We had the austerity period. But then towards the end of that period, as soon as we were able to as Conservatives, because we are absolutely committed to the NHS, we want to be the party of the NHS, over the last three years we’re putting in an extra six and a half billion pounds a year. And the result of that is you’re seeing an NHS which has got more funding, more doctors, more nurses.

Andrew Marr: But I put it to you, not enough. I mean, you’ve got a real problem of pay in the NHS, nurses who have had seven years of pay freeze. I put it to the Prime Minister that the Royal College of Nursing says that nurses are having to go to food banks at the moment. And she said there were complex reasons why people go to food banks. Are there complex reasons why nurses have to go to food banks?
Jeremy Hunt: Well, let’s look at the facts. The minimum a nurse can be paid in this country is £22,000 – £27,000 inner London – that assumes they do no night shifts or antisocial hours, which in practice most of them will. The average pay for nurses in £31,000, which is more than –

Andrew Marr: and its gone down by 11 per cent in real terms.

Jeremy Hunt: Well, we don't agree with those numbers, but that's – still they’re getting paid more than the national average. But is that enough considering the brilliant work – let me answer this, is that enough for doing the brilliant work that they do? I think many people would say we want to pay them more. I think they do an incredible job. So if you want more money, and you’ve asked me this before, if you want more money to go into the NHS, and this government recognises we will need to put more money into the NHS and social care system because of the pressures we face. Then the question is how you get there, and there is a non-NHS issue that overshadows everything, which is the Brexit negotiations. And I’m sorry to come to this, but it’s very, very important because -

Andrew Marr: I’m delighted you’re coming to it.

Jeremy Hunt: Because if we don’t get a good Brexit outcome and we don’t protect the economic recovery, the jobs that so many people depend on, whose taxes pay for the NHS, if we get a bad Brexit outcome that would disaster for the NHS, and the choice that people face is do they want a strong Theresa May doing those very difficult negotiations? There are 27 countries lined up against us. Some of them appear to think that for the EU to survive Britain must fail, and we need a strong Prime Minister. Or do we want Jeremy Corbyn who can’t even get his own party to agree on Brexit?
Andrew Marr: Let me interrogate that a little bit. In terms of the good deal that you say this country must have for the NHS to thrive, presumably that does not include no deal? Would no deal damage the NHS badly?

Jeremy Hunt: Well, we’ve been very clear that no deal is better than a bad deal.

Andrew Marr: I’m asking you whether no deal, leaving without an agreement, would damage the NHS in your view?

Jeremy Hunt: Well, we want a deal. We think a deal –

Andrew Marr: That’s not what I asked you.

Jeremy Hunt: Well, no, no we – let me answer very direct, we think a deal, getting a good deal will be better for the NHS, better for the economy, better for jobs, better for all of us, but we also recognise that bad deal will be bad for the country, bad for our long term future, and we’re not prepared to say that we will get a deal at any cost. And the real question though is –

Andrew Marr: But with respect – I’m sorry – with respect, what you’re really saying is good is good and bad is bad. And what I’m asking you is if we don’t get a deal is that bad for the NHS?

Jeremy Hunt: Well, you’re showing a lot of respect to me this morning, and thank you for that. But I would just say this: that what I’m saying very clearly is, in answer to your question, Andrew, which is I’m saying that a good deal would be best for the NHS, but obviously a bad deal would be the worst possible outcome for all our public services because it would be bad for the country. Now, the question is who do you –
Andrew Marr: You could answer this whole thing very straightforwardly. I’ve got an idea for you which I saw – I picked up from the side of a bus. We’re paying, according to the official figures, something like 18 billion over the next few years, 12 billion per year over the next few years to the EU. We could take that money and we could spend it on the NHS. You could go to the Prime Minister and the Chancellor Philip Hammond and you could say: ‘That’s what we need for the NHS. I’m on the frontline I know that’s what we should be spending, and that’s what we should be promising the British people during this election campaign.’

Jeremy Hunt: Well, what we’re promising the British people is the credible promise that if we want, as this government has shown, an extra, you know, six and a half billion in the last three years alone in the NHS, if we’re going to continue putting more money in, then we need a good deal, that strong economy. We’re not going to promise stuff that we can’t deliver. My worry about some of the promises you hear from Labour is that if you start making promises on the NHS and then you find you can’t deliver them, on things like nurses’ pay, what actually ends up happening is you end up having to lay off nurses from our wards, and then we go straight back to all the problems that we had in Mid-Staffs. But I think there’s a very important one, you know about stroke care better than many, many people, and I think stroke is a very good example of the good things that are happening as well as the challenges in the NHS, because we, according to the OECD, have seen some of the biggest improvements in stroke care in this country, saving thousands more lives. That’s a fantastic thing, But what we now have is new technology that can save even more lives. Now what I want is funding for the NHS to be able to do that new technology. And I know that with a strong Theresa May battling for Britain against those other countries we have the best chance of getting that deal.
Andrew Marr: It’s looking pretty cantankerous at the moment. It’s been a very, very cantankerous week on both sides. A lot of people look at this and think: do you know what? What I don’t want is a punch-up. I want proper grown-up negotiation with mutual respect and so forth. I don’t want a punch-up and I don’t want to hear Junker saying one thing and Theresa May coming back at him and thump. thump. thump.

Jeremy Hunt: Well, we all want that. But what I’m saying is that there is something very different about this election, because in a normal election you are choosing a Prime Minister for the next five years, but this time we’re choosing a Prime Minister who will do the Brexit negotiations that will last for generations. That’s why Theresa May’s role is going to be so important.

Andrew Marr: Before we come back to that, you’re announcing big changes on mental health this week. You’re tearing up the Mental Health Act, and I wonder why. And you’re going appoint, I’m told, 10,000 new mental health experts. But you’ve sacked 6,000 of these people in the last few years, so what’s going on?

Jeremy Hunt: Okay. Well, first of all this is a very important decision, that we’re going to deal with two real injustices. If you have a child that has severe mental health problems and you find that that child, instead of getting treated by the NHS actually ends up in a police cell, that is a terrible thing for the child, will probably make their condition worse, but it’s also very bad for the police as well. We want to stop that. And we also want to stop the – the fact that one in six of us have a mental health disorder, depressions, anxiety –

Andrew Marr: Can the government stop that?
Jeremy Hunt: No, no, we want to stop the fact that you can lose your job for that and suffer discrimination in a way that you would not be able to suffer now if you were disabled or other conditions. And we want to address those. So Theresa May has a very important economic mission, which is to get the best Brexit deal, protect Britain’s jobs and our economy. But she also said on the steps of Downing Street that she has a big social mission. She says she wants a country that works for everyone –

Andrew Marr: Is there any new money for this?

Jeremy Hunt: There is a lot of new money going into it. In January we said we’re going to put an extra billion pounds into mental health services by –

Andrew Marr: And does this come from other parts of the NHS or is it new money to the NHS?

Jeremy Hunt: No, it is coming – it is new money going into the NHS, that’s going into mental health, and it’s not just of course money, it’s having the people who deliver these jobs, which is why we need the 10,000 extra professionals.

Andrew Marr: You’ve talked about Brexit several times. Can I ask whether the Cabinet understands why and how the European Commission is trying to interfere and rig our election campaign?

Jeremy Hunt: Well, I think it’s very plain for everyone to see – and I think that because Brexit is the significant issue that overshadows everything in this election, that it’s a decision that’s made by the British people, and what people can see is that Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the SNP have all said they disagree with Theresa May’s approach. And every vote –

Andrew Marr: So are you saying –
Jeremy Hunt: What we’re saying is every vote for Theresa May will strengthen her hand in those negotiations because they will say to the Europeans who are causing us some of these problems, that the country is four-square behind Theresa in getting the best deal for Britain.

Andrew Marr: And she said that they were deliberately interfering in this country’s election to produce – presumably what you think is that they’re interfering to help Jeremy Corbyn against the Prime Minister, is that the allegation?

Jeremy Hunt: Well, I think, you know, -

Andrew Marr: - There’s got to be something

Jeremy Hunt: - they didn’t have to leak these reports to newspapers of dinners that happened in the middle of an election campaign and so -

Andrew Marr: So why did they do it?

Jeremy Hunt: Well, it is the wrong approach to negotiations. We want good negotiations; we want a good outcome –

Andrew Marr: I’m sorry, the Prime Minister has said this is about trying to fix our election. I’m just asking you, how are they trying to fix our election and in whose favour?

Jeremy Hunt: Well, you know, you’ll have to ask them why they chose to do that. But I think the answer is very clear, that they are trying to leak reports that undermine Theresa May’s position, and I think what the British people now –

Andrew Marr: So they’re trying to damage the Conservatives in this election.
Jeremy Hunt: I think what the British people know is that it’s for them to decide on this, not for people from other countries.

Andrew Marr: Are they trying to damage the Conservatives in this election, in your view?

Jeremy Hunt: Well, that must be the presumption. What we’re saying is that they should not be doing that because this is an election for the British people to decide.

Andrew Marr: So the Commission is intervening in this election to try to damage the Conservative cause and therefore to benefit the opposition parties?

Jeremy Hunt: Well, we’re saying we don’t want that to happen. It shouldn’t happen, and this must be a decision for the British people.

(ends)