JEREMY VINE:
Now the number of patients using accident and emergency services has increased by more than a million in a year. The pressure on A&Es is such that the Red Cross complained it’s being left to “pick up the pieces”. Official figures show that the vast majority of hospitals are failing to meet their target of seeing 95 per cent of patients within four hours; and, as we heard in the paper review, the health service managers have warned that the whole A&E system faces imminent collapse. The Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt joins us now. Good morning to you.

JEREMY HUNT
Good morning.

JEREMY VINE:
So I’ll talk about that in a moment, if I can, but first on Europe. What a mess!

JEREMY HUNT
Well I think John Redwood is actually right in what he said earlier - that if you look at
the substance of the issue, the Conservative Party is absolutely united. We look at the European Union and we worry about Britain’s ability to compete in the global race. We look at the regulations and the red tape that comes from Europe - I think yesterday you know some new regulation about selling olive oil in restaurants - and if you go into the boardrooms in New York or Tokyo or Singapore, they think the European economy is frankly a joke and we …

JEREMY VINE:
(over) If it’s united, why does Geoffrey Howe say you’re suffering “a long nervous breakdown” over the EU and David Cameron is “losing control”? Why would he say that?

JEREMY HUNT
Well I don’t think those views actually represent the reality. The substance is actually that the Conservative Party says if we’re going to be successful in that global race, we need to renegotiate our relationship with Europe and give the British people a say. And actually it’s the Labour Party where people are saying to Ed Miliband how can you possibly go into the next election ignoring this issue and actually saying that the Labour Party’s going to be the party that isn’t going to give people a choice. The Liberal Democrats, it actually was their policy at the last election. It was in their manifesto to have an in/out referendum and now they’re saying they’re don’t want to do it.

JEREMY VINE:
But talk about your party. No matter what you say - and you obviously have to toe a line here - but everyone is saying it is in meltdown now.

JEREMY HUNT
But I think you know …

JEREMY VINE:
Is it in meltdown?

JEREMY HUNT
That’s what the BBC are saying. I think if you actually look at …

**JEREMY VINE:**
I’ve just asked it?? Just answer it here??

**JEREMY HUNT**
Well if you look at the policy issue of substance …

**JEREMY VINE:**
*(over)* Have you seen the papers today?

**JEREMY HUNT**
Yes. But if you look at the policy issue of substance … That’s what I’m saying to you. If you look at the policy issue here, it is do we need to do something to make our relationship with Europe different? And on that issue, there is absolute unity and I think that’s you know a really important change. And again I think that what is different about what David Cameron has said is he said look, here are some serious issues which he’s not going to sweep under the carpet. We do need to change that relationship with Europe. He and I would like to have a relationship with Europe where we can stay in the European Union and be confident that we can be successful in the global race.

**JEREMY VINE:**
Do you think he’s being pushed around by the Eurosceptics into guar… saying … First he says he won’t have a referendum, then he says he will. Then you’re not going to have the draft bill now, then you do.

**JEREMY HUNT**
What he’s actually doing is showing leadership because what he said earlier this year is that this is a really important issue. If we’re going to have jobs and prosperity for our children and our grandchildren, then we need to have an economy where we’re actually able to compete with the Chinese and the Indians and the Brazilians and the Russians and all these growing economies, and frankly nothing that comes out of Brussels really gives you confidence that they get that. And we want to change that,
and as a Conservative Party we are the only party that’s said we’re actually going to do the heavy lifting on this. We’re going to go back to Europe; and then when we’ve done that we will ask the British people whether they agree that what we’ve done is the right thing.

**JEREMY VINE:**
If you win the next election, and it doesn’t look likely if you’re going to be divided going into it …

**JEREMY HUNT**
Well …

**JEREMY VINE:**
… but you say you’re not divided, you’re united.

**JEREMY HUNT**
… don’t be defeatist, Jeremy, if I may say.

**JEREMY VINE:**
*(over)* Okay, well I’m just ob…

**JEREMY HUNT**
*(over)* Well no, no, let me just …

**JEREMY VINE:**
*(over)* … observing the situation here. I mean just to be clear … *(talking over each other)* Just to be very clear. You are saying right now that your party is united on Europe?

**JEREMY HUNT**
Absolutely. On the substance of the issue that we need a changed relationship with Europe, the Conservative Party is saying we do. And actually that graph that David Aaronovitch pointed to earlier on in the programme shows that that is in tune with the majority of the British people and …
JEREMY VINE:
(over) So there’s no trouble?

JEREMY HUNT
Well look of course we have a debate because you know patriotism runs deep in the veins of all Conservatives, and when you have an issue of sovereignty it’s something that we debate fiercely. But you know as far as the next election’s concerned, I mean you know I don’t think we should be defeatist about this. There was a poll this week that showed that Labour’s lead has been cut to just 3 per cent, and I think lots of people inside the Labour Party are worrying that Labour isn’t showing the leadership …

JEREMY VINE:
(over) We’ll come onto them. Don’t worry about them for the moment.

JEREMY HUNT
Good.

JEREMY VINE:
Okay. Just we’ll come onto them with Lord Mandelson. But it is a shambles, isn’t it? You have the Prime Minister going to the White House and you end up in a conversation about the EU in front of Barack Obama where he has to give David Cameron advice and you’re saying it’s all fine.

JEREMY HUNT
When you decide as Prime Minister that you are not going to govern for popularity but you’re going to do the right thing for the country, of course it starts up big debates, and the hallmark of David Cameron is when it comes to the big decisions about, for example, cutting public spending to get the deficit under control, getting the immigration under control, reforming the welfare state, putting the cap on benefits - this is someone who has never shied away from the fight and it’s exactly the same on Europe. And I would just say this on the Europe issue because you’ve been talking about it a lot on this programme. Don’t underestimate David Cameron. People said
that he would never veto a European treaty. He did - the first Prime Minister to do so. People said he would never cut the European budget. He did. People said he couldn’t repatriate powers from Europe. He got us out of the bailout for the euro which has saved the country billions. This is someone who has delivered a very great deal.

JEREMY VINE:
Okay. Do you believe somebody close to him called your local party members “mad swivel-eyed loons”?

JEREMY HUNT
No I don’t. And the person who is alleged to have said that has denied it, and I know the individual and I trust him - he’s a man of great honour. And I …

JEREMY VINE:
(over) You don’t think he said it?

JEREMY HUNT
I don’t believe he did, no.

JEREMY VINE:
And you don’t think anybody else said it because last year we were told the Prime Minister was saying it?

JEREMY HUNT
Well if you look at … It certainly doesn’t reflect the views of the Prime Minister. And if you look at this Prime Minister, so much of what he’s done has been informed by the views and the opinions of hardworking grassroots Conservative campaigners whose views, incidentally, are very much in tune with the vast majority of the British people. I mean they’re the ones who said we’ve got to do something about immigration and Theresa May has cut immigration by a third. They’re the ones who said you know we’ve got to reward hard work and get rid of this something for nothing culture, and we’ve introduced a benefits cap and we’re finally for the first time since the war introducing real reforms to the welfare state. So the views of those people are incredibly important to the DNA of the policies that we’re putting into
place.

**JEREMY VINE:**
The people you mention of course have not been happy with the policy on equal marriage - gay marriage as it’s sometimes called. Are you happy with that policy? Philip Hammond isn’t.

**JEREMY HUNT**
Well I recognise that this is an issue of conscience and it’s a very, very difficult for many people.

**JEREMY VINE:**
Where are you on it?

**JEREMY HUNT**
I personally support it. I support it because I believe in the institution of marriage and I think that we should be encouraging people to make a lifelong commitment to each other. I think society is stronger if you do that. In my own case, I mean I chose to get married in a church and not in a registry office because I happened to want to make my marriage vows in front of God. I think if gay people want to do that and if the church is willing to conduct that ceremony, we shouldn’t stand in their way.

**JEREMY VINE:**
It seems to be divisive in your party. Well we know it is.

**JEREMY HUNT**
Well I think it’s one of those issues of conscience that’s not really about party. I think there are people of all parties that find this a very difficult issue, but I think it’s one that we’re right to surface and have a proper debate about.

**JEREMY VINE:**
Let me ask you about the health service then and this A&E problem and the fact that there are a million more patients in the last year because will you tell us why you think that is? Why are they getting overloaded?
JEREMY HUNT
Well I think there are short-term pressures and long-term pressures. I think we did have some teething problems with the new 111 service, which we’re now resolving. But I think the problem runs much deeper than that and if you talk to the doctors in A&E departments, as I’ve been doing a lot in the last few months, there are a number of things. One of them is that it’s harder now for hospitals to hit their targets because under the last government we, I’m afraid, had a culture of hitting targets at any cost, and that led to the appalling tragedy at Mid Staffs Hospital. And now hospitals rightly are saying that these targets matter, they do need to see people within four hours at A&E, but they’re not going to do so in a way that compromises patient safety.

JEREMY VINE:
But why is it going wrong? Your explanation seems to be it goes back to the GP contract in 2004 and, therefore, truncating the idea, GPs are to blame; and they’re cheesed off about being told that.

JEREMY HUNT
I would never blame GPs because I think they work extremely hard. I’ve been in GP surgeries and they have very, very long days. But I do think that contract is one of the contributing causes, yes, because I think what happened was when you removed the responsibility for services at the evenings and weekends from GPs, the service deteriorated and there’s a great loss of public confidence. If you call … If you need to speak to a GP out of hours, you’ll generally be speaking to someone who’s a long way away from you who doesn’t know you, can’t see your medical notes. And I don’t want to go back to the days of GPs personally being on call 2 o’clock on a Saturday morning. I mean they have long days and they need a family life too.

JEREMY VINE:
(over) So what’s the answer then?

JEREMY HUNT
Well …
If you can’t get them back on board, what do you do?

**JEREMY HUNT**

I think we need to go back to GPs having responsibility for making sure that for the people on their list, there is a good service available. And I think the reforms we’ve had in the health service help to make that happen, but I think there’s lots more we need to do.

**JEREMY VINE:**

You mention the target. If the target is - what is it - four hours maximum for 95 per cent of people who hit A&E, it doesn’t seem like you want to be undershooting that with very many people. Why would you lose that target?

**JEREMY HUNT**

Well we don’t. It’s a very important target and we’ve never said that in a large organisation like the NHS, you don’t need to have targets, and it’s a basic part of good care that when someone goes to hospital in an emergency, you see them quickly. But what is different from the last government is that we don’t want people to follow targets blindly at any cost. We had you know people being put into beds that hadn’t been properly cleaned; we had ambulances circling hospitals because they didn’t want to go through the front door of the A&E so the clock wouldn’t start ticking. That is not acceptable and so it is more challenging and hospitals rightly understand that, but yes we need to see people quickly.

**JEREMY VINE:**

The situation now seems to be you’ve brought this 111 line on too early. People ring it because they don’t trust the out-of-hours service because they know it’s not their GP. They end up being taken to A&E in an ambulance when (we saw a story today) somebody has diarrhoea and they end up being blue lighted to a hospital.

**JEREMY HUNT**

Exactly and that is the heart of the problem. Now we did have some teething problems with the new 111 service. It is up and running now in 90 per cent of the country and we are hitting our A&E targets, but I think that may have had a short-term impact. But
in the end we’re not going to deal with the problems in A&E unless we look at those long-term causes, and having better alternatives in primary care, a closer personal relationship between people and their GPs - something that many people think was lost by those contract changes - that’s going to be at the heart of the solution.

JEREMY VINE:
Jeremy Hunt, Secretary of State for Health, thank you.

JEREMY HUNT
Thank you.

INTERVIEW ENDS