



RUTH SUNDERLAND: Chancellor must tackle ill-health's £43bn toll on economy

- Osteoporosis could provide Jeremy Hunt with easy win
- Costs to economy could be reduced by ending post code lottery in diagnosis
- Additional cost of £30m a year to fund Fracture Liaison Services in NHS Trusts

By RUTH SUNDERLAND FOR THE DAILY MAIL

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Jeremy Hunt knows very well that one of the biggest threats to our prosperity – and his party's electoral prospects – is a dysfunctional labour market.

At the heart of the malaise is the sky-high level of economic inactivity: the nine million or so people who are not working for a variety of reasons. Of those, figures last week show 2.8million of working age have dropped out due to ill-health.

It is a serious problem. The shortage of skilled labour hurts productivity, fuels wage inflation and will lead to greater caution by the Bank of England on much-needed interest rate cuts. The Chancellor needs to help people back to work. Even better, he should take steps to stop them being forced out of the labour market by illness or injury in the first place.

There is no single, grand and over-arching solution. The answer will come in a range of initiatives targeted at common conditions keeping people out of the workplace. One of these, that could provide Hunt an easy win, is osteoporosis.

This devastating disease affects millions of men and women, many of them of working age. Lost earnings of sufferers, who are forced to leave their job or retire earlier than they wished, come to around £1billion a year, according to analysis by Oxford University economists.

The true figure will be much higher, if the lost earnings of people taking time off to care for elderly relatives with fractures were also taken into account. But the costs to the economy – and the human toll – could be reduced dramatically for a relatively small outlay to end the post code lottery in early diagnosis.

It would cost an additional £30m a year to fund Fracture Liaison Services in all NHS Trusts in England and Wales. They are only present in around half. By offering scans to anyone over 50 who turns up at A&E with a broken bone, they enable early diagnosis.



Problem: Chancellor Jeremy Hunt

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That can reduce the number of further broken bones by 40 per cent and prevent the loss of up to 750,000 lost working days in England alone. The Royal Osteoporosis Society has taken heartbreaking testimonies from some of those individuals.

Not malingerers, but teachers, nurses, decorators, retail staff, care workers and archeologists: people the economy needs. They were unable to continue with jobs they loved, because of fractures that would have in many cases been avoidable with early diagnosis. Politicians from both sides are calling on Hunt to roll out Fracture Liaison Services. They include Baronesses Ros Altmann, Catherine Meyer, Patience Wheatcroft, Molly Meacher, Helen Newlove and Kate Parminter, along with former Labour minister Lord Blunkett and shadow health secretary Wes Streeting.

Among MPs backing the campaign are Labour's Dame Margaret Hodge, Carolyn Harris and Judith Cummins, Conservatives Harriett Baldwin, Caroline Nokes, Caroline Dineage, Steve Brine, Neil O'Brien and Selaine Saxby, plus Lib Dem deputy leader Daisy Cooper.

There are no doubt other health conditions where the story is similar. Economic inactivity due to ill-health overall takes a toll of £43billion a year on the economy.

Last year, Hunt launched the WorkWell service to help around 60,000 long term sick and disabled people back into jobs.

That is a start. Ending the osteoporosis lottery won't solve the whole problem either, but it would be a big step in the right direction. As MP Caroline Nokes says, it makes 'moral, medical and financial sense'. I couldn't have put it better.