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The SNP government spends nearly £1.4 million a week on private hospitals to bail out the NHS, despite its supposed opposition to the independent care sector.

New figures have revealed £72 million of taxpayers' cash was paid to private firms to treat NHS patients in 2016/17.

And while that figure is a slight decrease from the previous year, some health boards recorded notable rises.

Scotland's biggest health board, Greater Glasgow and Clyde, spent more than £20 million on private hospitals, £3 million more than in 2015/16.

Others to record increases last year were Borders, Highland and Tayside.

It means the NHS across Scotland is handing £197,000 every day to companies to help treat patients and reduce waiting lists.

The statistics were published following a parliamentary question by shadow health secretary Miles Briggs.

He said the independent health sector played a valuable role in easing the strain on the NHS, and that the SNP should be thanking it, rather than continually talking it down.

During the 2014 independence referendum, the nationalists claimed the only way to save the NHS was by voting Yes, and that it opposed the use of private healthcare.

Since then, SNP ministers have spent tens of millions pounds each year utilising it.

Scottish Conservative shadow health secretary Miles Briggs said:

“Listening to the SNP you would think private healthcare was an evil that isn't welcome in Scotland.

“Yet now we see it spends millions every month using it to help out the NHS.

"We believe the independent sector plays a vital role in reducing waiting lists, and helping out an increasingly under-strain NHS.

"It's time the SNP admitted that, rather than reverting to its dogmatic playbook to appease the extremes of the independence movement.

"This is just the latest example of SNP hypocrisy, and the people and patients of Scotland are seeing right through it.

"The Scottish Parliament's Health Committee is hearing more and more cases of Scottish patients being encouraged to go private in order to receive the care they do desperately need – resulting in people dropping off NHS waiting lists and not being recorded within the NHS."