The Future of the NHS

Summary of Marie Curie response to the LSE and Lancet commission consultation on the future of the NHS

Background

The commission, formed by The London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE) and The Lancet, launched a call for evidence to discuss the challenges facing the NHS. It aims at exploring a selection of themes, such as workforce, funding, information needs and health inequalities. A report with several policy recommendations will then be released in 2019.

The commission asked three main questions in the consultation:

- From your/organisation’s perspective what are the biggest challenges facing the NHS in the immediate future and also looking forward over the next 20 years?
- What innovative solutions has your organisation trialled to address these challenges and what was your experience regarding their effectiveness?
- Any other issues your organisation wishes to highlight to our commission?

Challenges facing the NHS

The NHS faces significant challenges in the following key areas:

- An ageing population with increasing care needs
- Rebalancing community and acute care
- Building a sustainable workforce

The following examines the importance of each of these in detail.

Our ageing population

The UK has a rapidly ageing population. Within twenty years, government estimates expect the number of over-65s to have risen by just under 4.5 million (almost 50% of today’s total). This cohort is more likely to develop chronic health conditions or care needs, which will in turn place increased pressure on our health and social care services as their care needs will be correspondingly more complex. The NHS must be prepared to deal with this increase in demand, both in terms of funding and resources.

Marie Curie’s own research into how the ageing population will impact on health services found a worrying upward trend towards rising costs as people in the last year of their lives are repeatedly admitted to hospital as an emergency. Currently there are around 1.6 million of these emergency admissions for people in the last year of life in Britain each year, at a cost of around £2.5bn to the NHS. With the UK’s ageing population, these costs are projected to rise to £5bn by 2041 if the current trend in emergency service use for these people continues.

Ultimately this growing cohort of older people with significant care needs will need to be supported via acute services (such as hospitals) or by community-based services (such as care homes, hospices and peoples’ own homes). Either of these options will require significant investment in infrastructure, workforce and resources to shoulder this growth in demand.

Enhancing community care

Currently NHS funding is predominately weighted towards acute care delivered in hospital settings, which inevitably results in community-based services receiving comparatively less funding. Not having the right community care in place is particularly dangerous for older or vulnerable people, as it increases the likelihood of an accident or deterioration in their wellbeing that results in an emergency admission.
Community services have a key role to play in ensuring the sustainability of the NHS in future. The Marie Curie Nursing Service offers specialist end of life care at home, and an independent evaluation by the Nuffield Trust found that patients receiving care through the service see a reduced likelihood of emergency admission, improving their wellbeing and reducing total care costs per person by close to £500, the bulk of which was achieved through reduced hospital costs.\(^6\)

A sustainable workforce

Workforce issues are a pressing concern for the NHS. There are currently serious shortages of staff across a range of NHS professions, including district nurses (who are vital to providing good community care), registered nurses and GPs. This is particularly concerning given the amount of time it takes to train health professionals, as shortages will need to be addressed and planned for well in advance. The NHS needs to have a long-term workforce strategy in place to ensure a sustainable system.

Marie Curie has advocated for the restoration or replacement of the nursing bursary in recognition of this. The removal of the bursary has made the nursing profession less attractive to young people. As it stands, 2017 figures showed a decline of 12% in the number of people applying for nursing degrees in the last year, which has concerning implications for the future considering existing shortages.\(^6\) If government is serious about securing the NHS’ workforce, the bursary must be either re-established or replaced by a similar programme to encourage people to enter the profession.

In addition, the UK’s departure from the European Union poses a challenge for the NHS. There are around 62,000 EU nationals working in the NHS, 5.6% of the total NHS workforce. Since Britain voted to leave the EU we have already seen the number of EU nationals joining the NHS fall. This is particularly the case for nursing positions, where the proportion of EU nationals joining the NHS has fallen from 19% in 2015/16 to 9.6% in the year ending September 2017. We have also seen the proportion of EU nationals leaving nursing posts in the NHS increase from 8.9% to 12.7% in the same period.\(^6\)

Innovative solutions

Marie Curie works in partnership with a range of organisations to develop innovative new methods for providing the best possible care for people approaching the end of their lives. Marie Curie invests around £3 million per year in these partnerships, which range from service design and delivery to wider strategic partnerships. You can find out more about these partnerships on our website, at [https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/professionals/working-in-partnership](https://www.mariecurie.org.uk/professionals/working-in-partnership)

Other issues

The future of the NHS is intrinsically linked to the future of social care in the UK. There is a real danger that in prioritising the NHS over social care we run the risk of undermining both systems. As it stands, social care is in crisis. Despite growing demand for social care, cuts to local authority funding mean that adult social care spending has actually fallen since 2010/11, leaving services badly overstretched. This is a trend which will only become more pressing in future, thanks to our ageing population. The Nuffield Trust’s research into social care use at the end of life found that people accessing social care make less use of acute care.\(^6\) In addition, services like the Marie Curie Nursing Service could not exist without this care being available to allow people to stay at home.

The previous Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, Jeremy Hunt, has secured an addition £20bn of funding for the NHS over the next five years. While this is of course beneficial, social care has seen no equivalent increase in funding. As a result, this funding will not be able to address systemic issues in health and social care. A long-term funding solution needs to be found to ensure the future sustainability for the system.
The lack of concerted action in government on this growing crisis in social care means that the system has been left chronically underfunded. The government’s long-awaited Green Paper on social care hopes to solve these issues, but without a significant investment of resources this seems unlikely to have significant impact. If we do not get to grips with social care we will see a knock-on effect on the NHS as hospitals will have to pick up the slack created by depleted social care services.

For more information

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1 ONS, ‘Table A2-2, Principal Projection - Great Britain population in age groups’, October 2017, available online at https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/datasets/tablea22principalprojectiongbpopulationinagegroups
4 Royal College of Nursing, ‘Ministers must look again at student funding, the RCN says, as nursing degree applications fall further’, July 2018. Available online at https://www.rcn.org.uk/news-and-events/news/removing-the-student-nurse-bursary-has-been-a-disaster