

11th April 2011

The key challenges for the next government

The third term of the Assembly has wound up its business and the campaigning has begun. The four main parties of Wales are announcing their pledges and setting out their stalls to win the hearts and minds of the Welsh public.

However the debate shapes up in the next month, the health service is sure to be at the heart of the debate.

In the heat of an election campaign, the NHS in Wales is hoping all political parties will recognise the huge improvements that have been made in recent years to the speed and quality of care.

Five years ago there were thousands of patients waiting more than six months for hospital treatment – now the vast majority are treated well within 26 weeks.

The success of the 1000 Lives Campaign has saved 1199 lives through its work to reduce harm and variation.

Every year, hundreds of thousands of people across Wales are extremely grateful for the care they receive from skilled and compassionate NHS staff.

These improvements have been made in difficult circumstances, and credit must be given to the dedicated NHS Wales workforce. But the reality is that the way the NHS system currently operates will make it very difficult for us to keep making these improvements in the future.

The challenges we face are well documented. There will be growing pressure on services because of an ageing population and high levels of ill health in some parts of Wales. We rely too much on expensive hospital care. Finances are already very tight, and will be even tighter in the years to come.

In simple terms, the current system is unaffordable and unsustainable.

These are long-standing problems that we have known about for some time, so why do they still remain?

There are examples of great innovations in parts of Wales where these issues have been tackled on a local basis. Enhanced community services have reduced demand for hospital care, allowing some wards and even whole hospitals to close.

The challenge now is to make these changes on a much larger scale right across Wales.

For that to happen, the next government has to provide strong political leadership and create the right environment for the necessary changes to be made.

There are four ways in which we believe political leaders can do this:

Be open and honest about what the NHS can and cannot afford to do. In a publicly-funded service, it simply isn't possible to do everything that we would want in an ideal world. That means deciding on priorities and being open with the public about what services, drugs and treatments the NHS can and cannot provide.

Lead the debate on individual responsibility. All of us will need to use NHS services at some point in our lives, but there are things we can all do to reduce the likelihood of us needing hospital care. More public discussion is needed on individuals' control over their own health, together with continued investment in activities to reduce smoking, obesity and binge drinking.

Engage the public in the message that health services need to change. The NHS cannot provide every service in every hospital, but we can ensure that high quality services are available to everyone. Most services can be close to home, especially routine and planned care, but highly specialist care must be provided in fewer, better equipped centres of excellence.

Make joint working happen. With an ageing population and a growing need for longer-term care, definitive action is needed to bring health and adult social care together. Pooling resources and creating joint ways of measuring outcomes would put the focus on the needs of the patient, not on who does what or who pays for what.

None of this will be new to our regular readers but the repetition of these messages must not be allowed to dull their impact; indeed it should emphasise their urgency.

As time goes by, health services which are geared for yesterday's world become more unsustainable, not less.

The challenges are significant but not insurmountable.

With strong leadership and a political willingness to tackle difficult issues head on, the next government of Wales can take the right steps to make our health service fit for the future.