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The status quo is not an option

The enormity of the financial challenge facing the healthcare system in Wales is becoming clearer. Assumptions are that over the next three years, there will be between £1.3 and £1.9 billion less money available to the NHS in Wales.

This puts us at a defining moment for the future of the NHS in Wales. NHS services of course are vital, but it is also the country's largest employer and the Assembly's biggest budget area – so we must all be engaged in a mature debate about what we want our NHS to look like in the future.

As a nation we have to decide what sort of health service we want and can afford. How can we get diagnosis and treatment provided closer to our homes? How can we be sure that specialised hospital services will be there for us when we really need them? Can we be confident that we will always get the highest possible quality of care? Will the most modern drugs and equipment be available to us wherever we live? What responsibility should we all take for our own health and well-being?

The hard reality we all have to face over the coming years include: a smaller budget to provide services; a shortage of junior doctors; the limitations of the European Working Time Directive; ageing buildings, often sited in the wrong place; an increase in long-term conditions such as diabetes; and a rapidly ageing population.

Against this backdrop it is obvious that there are some very tough and unpalatable decisions to be faced up to as we approach the next Assembly election.

Even in the face of these realities it seems likely that we will continue to see campaigns to “save” services currently provided in local hospitals. Once such campaign is underway in North Wales to try and stop the closure of HM Stanley Hospital in St Asaph, even though the ageing building is no longer fit for purpose, costly to maintain and only a couple of miles away from a more modern hospital.

Changes that improve the quality and safety of services should be viewed as good news for patients. When it comes to highly-specialist treatment patients will often receive more effective care if they travel to a specialist centre, instead of being treated at their local hospital.

But the irony is that these developments are often seen as exactly the opposite. We have yet to see an impassioned local campaign in favour of transforming services, which demonstrates how far we have to go to persuade our communities of the need to do things differently.

The simple facts are:

1. Health services need to change regardless of the financial situation because the delivery of healthcare is constantly evolving; we can't and shouldn't try to do everything everywhere, but we must ensure that high quality services are available to everyone. Many services can be provided close to home, but some have to be based in specialist centres.

2. Publicly funded services such as the NHS, will always be under pressure, both in financial and demand terms. It simply isn't possible to do everything that we would want in an ideal world. We must be honest and open with each other about what we can and should do. That means deciding on priorities: a tough call. But above all, any of the decisions we make must be fair, objective and as sensitive as possible to the needs of local communities whilst still being effective and affordable.

3. Public services must work closer together, avoid duplication, ensure maximum value for money and demonstrate that they are using resources effectively to provide us all with the widest possible range and highest quality of services possible .

To bury our heads in the sand and do nothing is not an option available to the NHS any longer and we cannot afford to be sentimental about buildings or services. To do so will condemn the people of Wales to a future of worsening health services.

Royal Colleges will withdraw recognition of services, specialist posts will go unfilled because there isn't the critical mass of patients needed to attract doctors, unmanageable pressure will be put on hospitals and funding for new treatments won't be available because we are using the money to prop up outdated facilities.

If this is the future we want, then campaigning against change is the surest way to make it happen.