

29th August 2011

Can the 'care footprint' encourage better use of NHS resources?

Reducing our carbon footprint is a phrase we hear often – and it's likely that most of us understand what it means.

It's about being aware of our own personal responsibility for looking after the earth's precious resources, and making changes to our behaviour, however small and insignificant they may seem, to reduce our impact on the environment around us.

The high-profile public debate about individual carbon footprints means that we are much more aware of things like recycling and energy efficiency than we were even ten years ago.

Somewhere along the line there has been a huge cultural shift – is there a lesson here for the NHS?

Mike Farrar, the Chief Executive of the NHS Confederation, which represents NHS organisations across the UK, has recently introduced the concept of the 'care footprint'.

If the carbon footprint helps people to reduce their use of the earth's natural resources, then would a care footprint encourage better use of limited NHS resources?

Every healthcare system in the world is faced with rising costs. The idea of a care footprint could be a way of kick-starting a debate with the public about our relationship with our own health and how we use the services that, ultimately, we pay for.

Clearly, the NHS must always be there when people need it. Often we simply do not have a choice about whether we use it or not. Whether through illness or accident, our use of NHS services is generally unavoidable. The idea of a care footprint, however, is concerned with the use of NHS services which could be avoided.

A large part of our use of the NHS relates to lifestyle choices and behaviours. For example, the NHS in Wales spends over a £1m a week on treating health problems caused by alcohol misuse and another £1m each week on treating obesity.

An open and honest debate with the public about the challenges the NHS is facing would raise awareness of the costs involved in providing health services.

As with carbon, if individuals or communities could see their care footprint, they might be motivated and empowered to work out ways of reducing it.

In the case of the carbon footprint, the public debate has led to widespread use of household recycling bins across the country.

The question we need to ask is: what could be the NHS equivalent to recycling bins?

The debate on the care footprint has already prompted discussions on what could be done, with ideas ranging from patients being given more information on how much their care has cost, to introducing a fee for people who repeatedly miss hospital appointments.

The idea of a care footprint seems a great way to get people to start thinking in terms of their own impact on health resources. However, it is very important that debate on this topic does not discourage those people who really need health services from accessing them.

There is some fantastic work to encourage people to use NHS services – for example, campaigns to raise awareness of heart attack symptoms which explain why calling 999 is absolutely the right thing to do.

There is also the risk of stigmatising even further some services that people already find difficult to approach, such as mental health services. People should be encouraged to access the crucial services they need.

Traditional public health campaigns have been hugely successful at raising awareness of the impact some lifestyle choices have on our health. But what is needed now is a fundamental shift in the public mindset so people are prepared to take an honest look at how they use health services.

Initiatives like the idea of a care footprint could be seen as government interference or evidence of a nanny state. That perception has to change.

To shift that perception, what we can do of course is to support any emerging social movement and ensure that the right conditions and opportunities are there for people to make healthy choices.

Just as we already take steps to protect the earth's resources, perhaps we should also consider how we could be more aware of the impact of our own actions on the precious resources of the NHS.