



bulletin

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bulletin is a regular update for members on the work being carried out by the Welsh NHS Confederation on their behalf. It complements Interchange Alert, published by our London office, which gives members an overview of the Confederation's work at UK-wide level. If you have any queries about either publication, please contact kevin.sullivan@welshconfed.org

Special issue – Richard Thomas interview

Welsh NHS Confederation Director Richard Thomas retires on 31 March 2004, after five years in post. In this special issue Richard looks back over a long career of 42 years in the NHS in Wales.

What have been the key changes you have seen in your 42 years in the NHS in Wales?

The NHS in Wales in 1961 was a far cry from what we have today. The NHS Plan for England and Wales was in its infancy. The network of DGHs across Wales was still in the planning and design stages; only west Wales General Hospital, Bronglais, Singleton, and the Royal Gwent phase 1 were in commission. The remainder of secondary care was provided in the former local authority hospitals such as East Glamorgan Hospital and the former "voluntary" hospitals such as Caerphilly Miners, Brecon War Memorial, and Pembroke War Memorial.

Hospital services were administered by the Welsh Hospital Board which was also the regional planning authority. All consultant appointments across Wales were made by the Board. Day to day management was the responsibility of 22 management committees. By 1974 these had been reduced to 14. History was to repeat itself in the 1990s with the creation of NHS Trusts and the subsequent rationalisation to – you've guessed it – 14.

The teaching hospitals in Cardiff and Llandough were managed by the Board of Governors of the United Cardiff Hospital. The creation of Boards of Governors of teaching hospitals across the UK was a concession made by Aneurin Bevan to the highly influential specialists who taught and practised in these world centres of excellence to win their support in excluding teaching hospitals from the oversight of Regional Hospital Boards. That arrangement stood until 1970 when the University Hospital of Wales HMC came into existence.

Primary Care Services as we know them today – GPs, dentists, opticians, pharmacists – were very much independent contractors who were administered for "pay and rations" purposes by Executive Council. Ambulance services, district and school nursing and public health were the responsibility of the county councils under the leadership of the former medical officer of Health.

Computers were still to be invented and medical technology was in its infancy so there was no digital imaging. Orthopaedic joint replacements surgery was in its early days and cataract lens implants did not arrive until the late 70s. Medical technology was in its infancy – CT scanners had not been invented.

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Richard S Thomas, Director, Welsh NHS Confederation



What are the main lessons that your long experience in NHS management has taught you?

There are too many to set out here but the main ones are:

- To understand and accept that the NHS is a political football and will always be under attack from opposition parties and their supporting newspapers.
- Remember you are carrying out the policies of the government of the day so don't take criticism personally.
- Reorganisations are an inevitability and the service will lurch from one to the next. The important thing to remember is not to let the continually changing environment get you down. The sad thing of course is that the continual reorganising and restructuring takes managers' eyes off the ball of improving services for patients.
- Learning and taking on board the best elements and strengths of colleagues and managers I worked with, and avoid at all costs their weaknesses and limitations.
- I always worked on the maxim that if you can't do anyone any good, don't do them any harm. One day you may be passing them on the way down.
- Treating people fairly and with respect. This does not mean you do not get tough when necessary.
- Walking the job – you will be amazed what you pick up from colleagues about your organisation. It gives everyone confidence, gains you respect, and does wonders for staff morale and the whole atmosphere of the organisation.
- The critical importance at times of difficult service changes of carefully explaining to all staff, partner organisations, patients, public and the media, the reasons – and more importantly the benefits and improvements – of the new replacement service.

What do you think are the main challenges facing the service at the moment?

- Putting the HR and infrastructure capacity in place
- Modernising delivery systems and implementing the new pay and grading arrangements

- Getting everyone from politicians and staff organisations to the public and partner organisations to understand and support the changes

What does the future hold for the NHS in Wales?

I am confident that the numerous challenges faced by the service as it strives to carry through the modernisation agenda will be met and that the NHS in Wales can look forward to an exciting future in which it provides an ever improving range of services for the people of Wales.

What do you think is your biggest achievement during your time at the helm of the Welsh NHS Confederation?

Without doubt this was recruiting all the new LHBs into membership of the Welsh NHS Confederation.

I was mindful of the problem in the early 1990s when the NHS Trust Federation was established and broke away from the former National Association of Health Authorities and Trusts. This had a huge impact on the influencing power of these organisations as the NHS across the UK was not speaking as a single powerful voice.

The 100% membership of health bodies in Wales will allow the NHS Confederation to further develop and grow, enabling it to become a well-regarded, respected and informative voice for the NHS in Wales.

I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to share all of this with the membership in Wales and hope you have found it of interest. So as I look back over four decades I realise how privileged I have been to have had a career which has allowed me to influence the delivery of health care in Wales and hopefully in my small way to have made the difference for people. Hopefully our paths will cross in the future not as colleagues any more but as friends and I wish everyone every success and happiness for the future.

Richard S Thomas
Director
Welsh NHS Confederation

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NHS Confederation Publication Sales and Enquiries
DS1 NE, 1 Enterprise Place, Rolling Mill Road
Jarrow, South Tyneside NE32 3DP

Tel 0870 444 5841 Fax 0870 444 5842
E-mail publications@nhsconfed.org

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THE **WELSH NHS CONFEDERATION**
CONFFEDERASIWN GIG CYMRU 

The Welsh NHS Confederation
Regus House, Falcon Drive
Cardiff Bay CF10 4RU

Tel 029 2050 4090 Fax 029 2050 4190
E-mail info@welshconfed.org

www.nhsconfed.org/wales