

12th December 2011

Why the NHS needs to inspire people to live healthier lifestyles

Last week Professor Sir Mansel Aylward, chair of Public Health Wales, gave a stark insight into the challenges facing the NHS and the risk of what could happen if change is not achieved.

If the NHS continues to provide services in the same way, Sir Mansel warned, we could see health inequalities increasing with a growing gap in healthy life expectancy between the richest and poorest in Wales.

The Welsh NHS Confederation, which represents all health boards and NHS trusts in Wales, has been clear in saying that change is essential if we are to continue providing high quality care to everyone in the future.

And that doesn't just mean changing the way hospital services are provided so that we centralise specialist care. Neither does it just mean moving services into the community to reduce costly hospital admissions, although both these things are extremely important.

The whole emphasis of the NHS needs to shift so that it is a service designed to help people stay healthy, rather than just to treat illness.

The future of the NHS depends on how well we are able to help people keep fit, healthy and avoid the need to be treated for lifestyle-related conditions.

A report by the Bevan Commission, set up by the Health Minister to advise her on the future direction of the NHS, said the people of Wales need to be mindful that in putting their own health at risk, they further burden an already stretched public purse.

It is a timely reminder at this time of year when it can be easy to over indulge and forget about regular exercise.

The report talked about the need for cultural and attitudinal change, led by government but with a responsibility on all public services to work together to improve health.

This is no easy task.

The NHS will of course always be there when people need it, and there is no question that people will be given care of the highest quality possible, regardless of their lifestyle choices. This is not about apportioning blame.

What this does mean though, is that the NHS must take very seriously the influence it has in encouraging people to live as healthily as possible.

Equally, all public services have a role to play in removing barriers to healthy living, and ensuring that everyone has the same opportunities to make healthy lifestyle choices.

That means ensuring access to good quality housing, open spaces for exercise and affordable fresh ingredients for healthy meals, along with a range of other factors.

Only last week, the Welsh Government announced its priorities for transport infrastructure in Wales, which featured welcome increased funding for walking and cycling schemes.

And there are many examples of where the NHS is taking a leading role and being innovative in encouraging people to make healthy choices.

In an event jointly organised with the local authority, Abertawe Bro Morgannwg University Health Board ran a healthy workforce breakfast for business leaders to explain how supporting staff wellbeing, fitness and health can be a boost to their success.

Hywel Dda Local Health Board has an online Healthy New Year Countdown Calendar which reveals a new, simple health tip every day in the run-up to Christmas. It's been a huge success already, with over 2,000 hits in its first week.

And in Powys, the Designed to Smile team had a stand at the Royal Welsh Show, where they used interactive games and dental dress up to give advice to hundreds of children and families on maintaining dental health.

Initiatives such as these are giving people the knowledge and support they need to live healthier lifestyles.

This kind of investment in prevention has been proven to pay for itself in future years, which is why it is so important for the NHS, in partnership with organisations across the public sector, to keep finding new and innovative ways of inspiring people to live healthier lifestyles.

The future health of our population, and of our national health service, relies on it.