

18<sup>th</sup> July 2011

## **The future for rural health services in Wales**

This week's annual Royal Welsh Show in Llanellwedd will once again put rural life in the spotlight.

Although farming and agriculture are the hottest topics at the Showground, the NHS is using the opportunity to engage show-goers in the important debate on rural health.

The Welsh NHS Confederation, which represents the seven Health Boards and three Trusts in Wales, will launch *Prescription for Rural Health 2011*. This sets out our view of the issues facing the NHS in rural Wales.

More than a third of people in Wales live in rural areas, so no debate on the future of our health service can ignore the particular characteristics and patterns of rural life.

Overall the evidence suggests that people in rural areas have healthier lifestyles and enjoy better health than in urban areas. But it is important to remember that people in rural areas still suffer from the same diseases and conditions as people who live in more urban settings. And high quality, safe services must be available to everyone, wherever they live.

The most immediate concern for many patients in rural areas is that of distance. It goes without saying that living 'in the country' means longer travelling times to lots of services and facilities, including hospitals providing specialist care. These may be city hospitals in Wales or across the border in England.

Patients also face longer travelling times to reach their local community service or GP. It is especially problematic for people in more remote villages where public transport is limited.

In addition, the rural population is ageing at a faster rate than the urban population. Over time, this will increase the prevalence of health problems associated with growing older.

The larger proportion of older people has the dual effect of more people needing to use the health service, and fewer people of working age to deliver it. Rural hospitals have found it particularly difficult to recruit junior doctors, who are more attracted to the training opportunities found in urban centres.

These issues present real challenges for those who plan and deliver rural health services.

We know that there is not enough money, or enough health professionals, to provide every type of healthcare service in every hospital.

This is particularly true in rural areas, where there are too few patients to run some services safely or effectively.

The current financial climate requires new and innovative ways of delivering healthcare and the effective use of scarce resources - staff, equipment and facilities.

There is no doubt that successful innovation is already taking place.

Mobile facilities are bringing vital services into local communities, for example. These include screening, dialysis treatment, mental health checks, and a range of other diagnostic services.

Telemedicine is allowing specialist consultant expertise to be available even in remote rural GP surgeries, while SKYPE internet links are being used for home dialysis patients to contact expert help. Networks of community hospitals are providing 'intermediate care' to allow patients to be moved closer to home from 'acute' hospitals once they no longer need specialist support.

By organising health services in this way, patients may need to travel further for very specialist, more complex treatment, but the majority of their care will be provided nearer to where they live, reducing the overall need to travel.

Many new projects are being funded by the government's Rural Health Innovation Fund which demonstrates the Ministerial commitment to improving services for rural Wales.

Despite many positive improvements in local, rural healthcare, we recognise that people are protective of traditional services, and particularly attached to much-loved small local hospitals. But as more healthcare is community based, the role and function of some hospitals will change. We must shift our focus onto the quality and safety of the service, rather than the building.

We now need across the board support for transformational change not just in principle, but in practice.

Change, any change, is rarely popular, but the NHS cannot afford to stand still.

As the Health Minister said in a recent debate in the Senedd: "Allowing essential change and improvement will allow [the NHS] to flourish. I believe that the mindset that sees staying put as the right approach is wrong and dangerous."