

7<sup>th</sup> March 2011

## **Clarity and realism needed in election debate**

American historian James Harvey Robinson once wrote: “Political campaigns are designedly made into emotional orgies, which endeavour to distract attention from the real issues involved.”

This implies that clarity and realism are not generally features of politically-charged election campaigns and unclear and misleading election rhetoric can risk obscuring and confusing difficult discussions on issues like health.

Wales is not immune from this political phenomenon, but in the coming election we simply cannot afford to avoid the challenges we currently face in healthcare.

These challenges are not just about money – though we face a time of unprecedented financial challenge – but are also about finding ways of keeping up with rapid technological change, rising expectations and overcoming the increasingly scarce availability of junior doctors.

Health services in Wales have improved greatly over the last decade but there is still much to do to reach our goal of world-class services.

We have to find a way of using our resources to best effect.

The greatest challenge facing the NHS in Wales is to shake off outdated ways of doing things and usher in the new.

Some health facilities and services will be developed; some will do different things and some will no longer be viable at all.

The necessity for these changes is a fact of life and cannot be ignored by either politicians or the wider public.

Political attacks on easy targets – managers, support staff and bureaucracy – completely miss the point. The real issue facing the NHS is about radically reshaping services.

Any election campaigning that says this is not so is at best naive and at worst misleading. The array of promises that will undoubtedly be found in forthcoming manifestos poses an important question: where will the money come from?

Public money is always under huge pressure, now more than ever before, so it figures that investment in new or extended services will have to come from dis-investment somewhere else.

The facts to bear in mind are:

The NHS is a huge and complex organisation and cannot function without its managers, back room and supporting staff;  
Healthcare is expensive and choices will always have to be made about what we can or cannot provide;

The future of healthcare can no longer be predicated on bricks and mortar.

Hospitals are no longer the right place for an increasingly wide range of diagnosis and treatment, but when we need them they must be the best.

We simply cannot provide everything everywhere. We must merge specialist services to concentrate expertise and resources, improve training and provide meaningful audit to show the service is improving.

If we don't the NHS will be unsustainable and unable to provide the high quality of care that is expected.

We have the choice of either planning and shaping change now or waiting for it to happen anyway – health service development across the world dictates that change is inevitable.

It is far better for us to face up to this now than to let things deteriorate through circumstances beyond our control.

Whatever the outcome of the forthcoming election, the new Assembly Government will have to face up to these very challenging, yet unavoidable issues.

It would do the people of Wales a disservice to cloud this crucial debate with political smoke and mirrors.

All of us in Wales deserve and expect world-class health services. To achieve them we must all take responsibility for making this happen.

This makes it all the more important for politicians in Wales to demonstrate they can rise above empty rhetoric and provide an honest and sustainable vision for health services for now and for the future.