

16th May 2011

Our prescription for a healthier Wales

As the fourth National Assembly begins its work, the NHS in Wales is facing many challenges and changes.

Health is always a major issue, which has an impact on everyone in Wales. And as a key devolved policy area, health will, no doubt, figure large on the new Assembly Government's agenda.

The Welsh NHS Confederation, which represents Wales' seven health boards and three NHS trusts, has already sent AMs a copy of Prescription for Health 2011 – information about the NHS in Wales, including an outline of current issues.

There is general recognition that improvements have been made in the NHS in Wales.

Patients come into contact with the NHS some 22 million times every year and surveys show that the vast majority are pleased with their experience.

The 1,000 Lives campaign has put patient safety at the top of the healthcare agenda; most people now receive hospital treatment within 26 weeks; deaths from coronary heart disease continue to fall; and scientific breakthroughs and quicker referrals mean diseases that were previously untreatable can now be managed.

This is all good news.

But it is clear 2011 will be a defining moment for the NHS in Wales.

The resources available will be very tight for the foreseeable future. If the NHS is to continue to improve it needs to transform and change how services are delivered to patients.

Wales needs to decide what sort of health service we want and can afford. One of the most significant challenges is the growing number of older people.

Census data tells us that by 2031 the number of over 75s will have increased by 75% compared to 2001.

A third of adults in Wales already have at least one chronic condition, such as asthma, diabetes or arthritis. Older people are more likely to have a long-term, chronic illness. An increasing elderly population means the number of people needing treatment for such conditions will also rise.

Wales has a strong base on which to increase the quality and amount of care provided in the community thanks to the existing network of GP, pharmacy and nursing services.

What we need to get away from is the perception that hospital is the best place in which to receive NHS services. We need to move to a situation where primary care is seen as important as hospital care.

The NHS needs the people of Wales to start taking greater responsibility for their health and well-being.

This will, in time, help to relieve the increasing pressure on the NHS, its staff and its budgets. It will also lead to a fitter, more active and healthier population.

Given these challenges, the need to change the way health services are delivered is both necessary and unavoidable. But it also offers opportunities to work differently and to provide better healthcare.

Politicians have an important role in helping the public to understand why health services need to change.

The NHS cannot provide every type of healthcare service in every hospital. But it can, and must, ensure that high-quality, safe services are available to everyone.

This will require highly specialised care and treatments to be provided in fewer, better-equipped centres of excellence. At the same time, people will no longer have to travel for other services which could be provided in local community-based facilities, or even at home.

There was cross-party support for the findings of the Wanless review in 2003, which concluded that the current way of providing health services was unsustainable.

We now need to see across-the-board political support for transformational change – not just in principle but in practice.

Tough decisions will have to be taken. And change, any change, is rarely popular.

What the nation's 60 AMs and the new Assembly Government can expect from the NHS is a commitment to working together to continue the development of a modern, safe, quality health service which meets the ever-changing needs of the people we serve.

What we must ensure is that there is honest dialogue between all parties with a commitment to openness on both sides.

Only in this way can we move forward into a sustainable future.

