

22nd November 2010

Why chronic conditions pose the biggest challenge

The Welsh NHS Confederation, in conjunction with the Assembly Government recently held an international conference in Cardiff to look at how to best manage chronic health conditions.

Chronic conditions place considerable demand on NHS services in Wales, accounting for 80% of all GP consultations and many potentially avoidable hospital admissions.

A third or 800,000 of our adult population has at least one chronic condition; 13% have two or more conditions.

The chances of having a chronic condition increases with age and currently two-thirds of the over-65s have at least one chronic condition.

Increasing demands on services, skills and resources require us to develop better ways of dealing with chronic conditions based on prevention, early intervention, and support to enable people to live healthy independent lives in their own homes.

Chronic conditions are long-term or degenerative conditions that cannot be cured, although they can be prevented, treated or controlled. Obvious examples are diabetes, respiratory disease, asthma and heart disease.

The challenge is enormous and is increasing daily as our population ages – the World Health Organisation has said chronic conditions are the 21st century healthcare challenge.

Of course, many patients with a chronic condition live normal lives. But there are those who may have difficulty living with their conditions; may have several problems with complications and do not take their medicines or do not lead healthy lifestyles.

Finally, the most extensive users of health and social care services are those with the most complex needs. They are the smallest group, but require the most from our health and social care services.

In Wales, three demonstrator areas – Carmarthenshire, Cardiff and North Wales – have been set up to test new ways of managing care for people with chronic conditions.

We heard at our conference that, as a direct result of giving more targeted individual care in Carmarthenshire, emergency medical admissions have been reduced by almost 40% for chronic emphysema; 30% for heart failure, and 10% for diabetes.

But are there lessons we can learn from elsewhere?

Dr John Merenich, from US healthcare provider Kaiser Permanente, told us how it has integrated all services so people are at the centre of a co-ordinated system of care.

In addition a wide range of health professionals, such as pharmacists, play a bigger part in care and that care is rarely provided in hospital.

For many conditions hospital admissions are considered a symptom of system failure.

This constant drive to ensure people are cared for in the correct and less costly part of the system is leading to a continued emphasis on new and radically different approaches to managing disease in Wales.

One such radical idea is of “active management”. This is where an array of intensive preventative care is targeted at those at highest risk of hospital admission.

Key to this approach are case managers who help individuals to manage their diseases, often using really practical interventions such as daily telephone coaching, as well as co-ordinating services from other health professionals. However, there are still a number of barriers to future progress.

We need our doctors and nurses to rise to the challenge presented by chronic conditions and help lead the change in the way we deliver services.

The NHS has been engaged in discussions about clinical leadership for some time but it is now crucial this becomes a reality. We also need more help from the people of Wales.

Currently many people do not take care of their own health as well as they could. We have rising levels of obesity – clear evidence that people don’t take enough exercise – and above average levels of drinking and smoking.

The rising tide of chronic conditions and the impact this has on the quality of life of many people means this situation now has to change.