



# briefing

## Primary Care: At the heart of a strong NHS

Over 90% of the 22 million contacts between Welsh patients and their NHS take place in primary care. These contacts could be with community nurses in patients' homes, with GPs or nurse consultants in surgeries, in accident and emergency departments, with pharmacists or optometrists, and - increasingly - through access points such as NHS Direct.

These figures alone highlight the central role of primary care within the NHS in Wales.

### A strong primary care sector

- Primary care should continue to be strengthened. We firmly believe that the NHS in Wales should be primary care-led.
- Increased capacity is needed to address a legacy of underinvestment in many parts of primary care but also to meet fast-growing demand. Demand on primary care is increasing by around 6% per annum. Technological advances mean that new treatments are becoming available. Expenditure on drugs alone is increasing by around 10% per annum. Meeting this massive challenge will be impossible without sustained investment in additional resources, staff and capacity throughout primary care.
- As well as more capacity, new ways of working are needed, with services redesigned around the patient rather than around established organisational boundaries.
- To deliver a primary care-led NHS, further and sustained investment to strengthen existing management expertise is essential. Primary care is an area which has seen consistent under-investment in management. Local Health Boards and their successor organisations will have a vital leadership role to play and it is essential that they possess the levers needed to deliver change.

- Primary care needs to be conceived - and managed - as a system or sector in its own right. This means for example uniform protocols covering the increasingly wide range of access points - GPs are not the only access points to the service. It also means a modern and co-ordinated IT infrastructure, and a clear sense of identity as a vibrant sector within the NHS family.
- Best practice must be made universal. There are many examples of best practice in primary care in Wales, but equally there are many areas where the quality of service is very poor. The challenge is to ensure that a service model built on best practice is rolled out across the primary care sector in Wales.
- The primary care team should be the basic building block within the primary care sector. We fully support making better use of the skills of all the professions in the primary care team. This includes encouraging greater leadership and prescribing responsibilities amongst nurses, and developing the skills of practice managers.
- Patients need to be fully engaged and involved in their primary care services, through CHCs and other mechanisms.

### At the heart of a strong NHS

- No sector is an island, and a strengthened primary care should be part of a strong NHS. The challenge is to ensure that seamless and high-quality care, centred around the patient, is delivered right across the NHS, not only in one sector. It follows therefore that strengthening primary care must not mean weakening other parts of the NHS, but forging stronger and more effective links with them. The need for these links is particularly clear in areas such as IT.

- Primary care could be seen as the heart of the NHS. The familiar “gatekeeper” image, though consistent with the principle of “first contact,” also suggests that primary care is at the periphery of the health service rather than at the centre. Rethinking the assumptions behind the language we use is an important part of raising the prestige of primary care and giving proper recognition to the key role it plays.
- Redesigning services around the patient means that the boundary between primary and acute care within the NHS should not be regarded as sacrosanct. For example, we have recently argued that much outpatient activity, currently carried out in secondary care settings, could arguably be far more effective if carried out in primary care (provided of course that the necessary resources and support was made available). Primary care resource centres / polyclinics also provide an opportunity to redesign services around the patient, bridging the boundaries between primary, secondary and social care.

## At the heart of the health system

Health goes wider than the NHS. The health improvement agenda involves partners in other fields too, including local government, the voluntary sector, and the corporate sector. Primary care has a pivotal role to play by linking with these partners as well with other parts of the NHS.

- We welcome the closer co-operation between primary care organisations and partners in local government and the voluntary sector. This is essential if the care provided is to be integrated, seamless and centred around the patient.
- Effective joint working comes from working as equals, and in terms of organisational strength, influence and prestige, primary care is not yet on an equal footing with other sectors. To avoid the danger of primary care being squeezed out before it has had time to grow, in the short term it may require special focus and protected investment for organisational development so that it is fully prepared to assume its leading role...
  - As a strong and vibrant sector
  - At the heart of a strong NHS
  - At the heart of the health system

## Priorities

- **Workforce** - capacity needs to be increased in all parts of the primary care team, and we need to increase the status of primary care and its attractiveness as a career option. Retaining staff requires investment in training and skills development.
- **Information & IT** - Investment in IT is an investment in patient care. For example it can help ensure continuity of care as patients encounter different professionals. As the Wanless report argued, the cost of not having a modern IT infrastructure is enormous. Primary care needs this infrastructure to bind together individual teams and the sector as a whole, linking with a broader IT set-up across the health system.
- **Premises** - many primary care premises in Wales are of a very poor standard, especially in deprived areas. A strategic approach to managing primary care premises is necessary, and a scheme that is similar in operation to the NHS Lift scheme in England could be a future option for securing additional funding. Flexibility of design should be a key criterion in any new premises, to enable them to meet changing demands.