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Royal College of Surgeons

House of Commons briefing

Royal College of Surgeons
ADVANCING SURGICAL CARE

Debate on a NHS and Social Care Commission

The NHS and the social care systems are currently living on a knife-edge. The Royal College of Surgeons strongly backs calls for a cross-party commission on the future of the NHS and social care, including their funding.

The NHS

The Government's commitment to extra money for the NHS in the comprehensive spending review was very welcome, although questions remain about whether this secures the long-term sustainability of the NHS in its current form. Patients were seen over 15 million times in hospitals in 2014/15 – a 30% rise in a decade. We should celebrate the fact that people are living longer but we need to recognise this will also create new challenges for the care the NHS provides.

Despite the extra funding, there is evidence that the NHS is facing significant pressures. Providers clocked up a deficit of £1.6bn in April-September 2015[1], and all of the different surgical specialties are now missing their waiting times targets[2].

We also remain sceptical about the ability of the health service to fully meet the expected efficiency targets. The large proportion of the NHS' budget spent on pay further reduces room for manoeuvre on savings. In fact, there is evidence that the NHS might be restricting access to treatment in order to balance budgets. In 2014 our report *Is Access to Surgery a Postcode Lottery?* we found that clinical commissioning groups (CCGs) are imposing arbitrary referral restrictions and denying access to vital surgical procedures. Over a third of CCGs (44%) required patients to be in various degrees of pain and immobility or to lose weight before allowing access to surgery.

Social care

The situation in social care looks even more serious. 2015 witnessed the first fall in the total number of care home beds since records began.[3] The NHS is now seeing the consequences, in particular through a dramatic increase in the number of patients being unnecessarily delayed from leaving hospital following treatment. This then stops others from coming into hospital due to a lack of bed space. Between September 2013 to 2015, the number of delayed hospital discharges caused by social care increased by 44%[4].

According to the Local Government Association, the adult social care funding gap is increasing by £700m each year, and is expected to reach £2.9bn by 2020.[5] The NHS England Chief Executive Simon Stevens has referred to social care (and public health) funding as the 'unfinished business' of the comprehensive spending review. We agree. We need to urgently review how we can better provide and fund the care of older people in the community.

The time has come for an independent cross-party commission which would allow these issues to be scrutinised and solutions aired. For the sake of patients, this long overdue debate with the public has to happen now.

For further information: please contact Patrick Leahy, Head of Press and Public Affairs, via pleahy@rcseng.ac.uk

[1] Gov.uk. NHS providers: quarterly performance report (quarter 2, 2015/16). 2015 November 20.
[2] NHS England. Consultant-led Referral to Treatment Waiting Times Data 2015-16.
[3] LaingBuisson. Press release: Government austerity measures have created two-tier long term care market which is failing state supported residents. 2015 September 30.
[4] House of Commons Library. Delayed transfers of care in the NHS. 2015 December 2.
[5] Local Government Association. Spending Review Submission. 2015 September.