

17th Annual Self Care Conference

Self care is crucial for NHS survival, experts warn

With a fast-growing population of elderly people and concerns over the future of the NHS, the UK is now facing two of its biggest-ever challenges, and its success in dealing with them will depend largely on people taking far greater responsibility for their own health and care, say experts.

The massive problems resulting from people living much longer but not always healthy lives are already confronting Japan and other Asian nations, and will soon have to be faced in the UK, Tim Kelsey, national director for patients and information at NHS England, has warned.

Better self care is essential if longer lives are also to be as healthy, active and enjoyable as possible, he told the Self Care Forum's Annual Self Care Conference in London on 11 November 2015.

Against the background of these massive challenges, healthcare provision across the country is still uneven, and in three major areas things are actually getting worse, according to NHS England. The agency's NHS Five-Year Forward View (FYFV), published in October 2014, has found for example significant and widening variations in the provision of preventative measures - such as action against smoking and obesity - and warns that, without more investment, this can only get worse.

Key to improving quality

The FYFV also finds that patients' experiences of the quality of care available to them vary considerably depending on where they live. This is "totally unacceptable," Mr Kelsey told the Self Care Conference but, he added: "self care has a very key role to redress this."

The third gap revealed in NHS England's report relates to the sustainability of the NHS. By 2020-21, the funding gap between the NHS' budget and its rising costs is expected to reach £30 billion, and while the government has pledged to supply £8 billion, that leaves the Service to find the lion's share of £22 billion.

Many experts have expressed concern at the size of the financial challenge facing the NHS. However, Mr Kelsey told the Conference: "I think we stand a decent chance of achieving it."



Tim Kelsey (NHS England)

He called for a wide range of strategies to accomplish this, including the use of self care as potentially "a fundamental driver of improvements to care and reduction of health problems in hospitals." However, the evidence necessary to show what effect better self care could have on the NHS is lacking.

"We need to define what is the minimum level to be achieved by self care for NHS savings, and we need to be promoting the economic as well as clinical benefits of self care," he said.

Mr Kelsey leads NHS England's technology and information agenda, which seeks to transform customer service in health and social care through initiatives such as supporting doctors and nurses to help people use health apps, and even prescribe them. This agenda is now "full front and central," he said, but its success will depend on improvements in a number of areas. For example, we need to get much better at communicating the benefits of self care - "and we will get the evidence for this," he pledged - and at supporting people to help them understand the concept of shared decision-making, which many find confusing.

Practical applications of self care

The content of this year's annual Self Care Conference – the 17th – was remarkably different from those of previous years. In the past they have tended to focus strongly on making the case for self care – eg, outlining the benefits of empowerment, highlighting the cost of self-treatable conditions, managing long-term conditions, wellness and prevention, however more recently there has been an acknowledgement of these benefits at all levels, both for individuals and for the NHS.

So the emphasis on this year's Conference was strongly about "how to do it" - the practical applications of self care.

"Local NHS organisations are now at the point where they want to know how to embed self care into their systems, and how to deliver it," said conference organiser Libby Whittaker, public affairs executive at the Proprietary Association of Great Britain (PAGB). So this year, the meeting offered what one speaker described as "the perfect mix" - professionals seeking practical advice and support, and experts providing it. As a result, there was unprecedented demand for places at the Conference, and maximum attendance figures were reached early on.

In another major development, Dr Pete Smith told the meeting that the Self Care Forum is shortly to become the Self Care Foundation, a not-for-profit charitable incorporated organisation. The Foundation will be the home of self care, he said, and encouraged delegates to express interest in becoming members.

Dr Smith traced the development of self care to its current position as a central role of health policy in England. Its importance was first flagged up in the 2000's NHS Plan for investment and reform, which identified self care as "one of the key building blocks for a patient-centred health service."

Then in 2005, the Department of Health published its self care strategy, which pointed to the potential for self care to improve health outcomes and increase patient satisfaction. The strategy also noted that, while minor illness and injuries account for around 75% of A&E attendances, around 15% of these have the potential to be taken care of by people themselves.

Almost two-thirds of GP consultations result in a prescription being written which could have been treated by over-the-counter medicines provided by pharmacists, or no medicines at all.

"40% of GP time is spent dealing with patients with minor self-treatable illness; when provided support for self care, people can take care of these ailments themselves," the government document stated.



Dr Pete Smith (Self Care Forum)

More recently, research by PAGB has shown the significant burden self-treatable conditions continue to place on the NHS, accounting for 18% of GP visits in 2010 and 19% of A&E attendances in 2014.

In 2002, Sir Derek Wanless' groundbreaking review of the long-term trends affecting the NHS had emphasised the need to develop, by 2022, a climate in which the public are "fully engaged" with their health. Increased self care could reduce the numbers of visits to GPs by over 40% and outpatient visits by 17% and, based on these findings, the Department of Health has estimated that for every £100 spent on encouraging self care, around £150 worth of benefits can be delivered in return, he noted.

Some developments envisaged in Sir Derek's "fully engaged" scenario have since become reality, said Dr Smith, and by October 2014 the FYFV was pointing out that many people "wish to be more informed and involved with their own care, challenging the traditional divide between patients and professionals, and offering opportunities for better health through increased prevention and supported self care."

"The arguments for self care have been won - you know they have when people start claiming that they thought of them first," he told the Conference.

For more information email
selfcare@selfcareforum.org