

NHS and social care funding

House of Commons

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The British Medical Association (BMA) is a voluntary professional association and independent trade union, representing doctors and medical students from all branches of medicine across the UK and supporting them to deliver the highest standards of patient care.

Key points

- The NHS is very clearly struggling to cope with unprecedented rising patient demand against a backdrop of crippling financial restraint. The result of this is bed occupancy at record highs, social care on the brink of collapse, and patients unable to reliably access general practice, the NHS is at breaking point.
- What we have seen over recent days is the fruition of consistent warnings from across the health sector. In recent years, the NHS has been existing in a state of year-round crisis. It has meant that when the inevitable spike in demand comes during the winter months, there is no spare capacity in the system to cope.
- Cuts to acute beds and the chronic underfunding of health and social care has resulted in patients facing unacceptably long delays for treatment, compromising the safety and quality of care which patients receive. NHS staff are working flat out in a system which cannot cope and are under increasingly difficult circumstances – this is clearly and significantly impacting on workforce morale.
- Despite warnings from the Health Select Committee, Public Accounts Committee, Communities and Local Government Committee, and stakeholders across the health and social care system including the BMA, the government has failed to grasp the seriousness of the crisis in the NHS. The government must acknowledge warnings from all parts of the NHS and look urgently at the long term funding, capacity and recruitment issues facing the health service.
- The BMA believes that the funding crisis in the NHS is not just the result of financial mismanagement but a legitimate inability to cope in the face of unprecedented patient demand. This unprecedented patient demand must be matched with increased investment.

NHS staff

NHS staff across the entire health and social care system are having to work under increasing pressure, in a system unable to cope, and making huge efforts to strive to ensure that patients receive the level of care which they deserve and doctors want to deliver. Under-staffed and under-resourced hospitals are having to manage unprecedented levels of patient demand and doctors believe that these pressures are significantly impacting on their ability to deliver adequate levels of patient care.



The imposition of a junior doctor contract on an overstretched and understaffed NHS has worsened morale further. The ever increasing pressure and feeling of being devalued by government risks exacerbating the recruitment and retention crisis as demoralised and demotivated doctors choose to leave the health service at a time of unprecedented patient demand.

Social care

The social care system is on the brink of collapse and failures within the social care system have a huge impact on an already stretched and underfunded NHS. To provide sufficient care to an ageing population, with higher incidences of co-morbidities, it is essential that funding and staffing levels in social care increase. However, in recent years funding for the provision of social care in England has fallen and the system is in desperate need of urgent funding.

Inadequate social care provision causes patients to experience delays in being transferred from hospital to appropriate social care settings, impacting negatively on patient care and placing further financial strain on the NHS. The cost to the NHS of bed days occupied by patients no longer in need of acute treatment is estimated to be £820 million.

Government plans to allow local councils to increase spending on social care will not alone help to address the long term national crisis facing social care. The extra funding is likely to raise an extra £200 million in the next two years, which is still not enough to plug the estimated social care funding gap by the end of 2020. The BMA believes that the current crisis in social care is a direct result of inadequate funding and the government must urgently find a long term solution.

General practice

General practice is also under unprecedented pressure and there are not enough GPs to cope with increasing patient demand. There is a chronic shortage of GPs with one in three practices having unfilled doctor vacancies¹. There are further serious shortfalls in the number of doctors choosing to train as GPs with senior GPs choosing to retire early or leave the NHS all together due to increasing pressures. The BMA's 2016 survey of over 5,000 GPs found that 31% of practices are still unable to fill GP vacancies at all, while 27% are unable to fill vacancies within 6 months².

To address this the government must do more to promote the uptake of general practice amongst trainees, to work with the profession to retain the current level of GPs and attract more GPs into the workforce. Alongside this recruitment crisis, GPs are conducting more consultations every year. A recent BMA survey found that 84 per cent of GPs said that workloads are now so unmanageable it is affecting the delivery of safe patient care. In order to ensure patients receive the care they need the government must urgently deliver extra investment in general practice and take steps to tackle the recruitment and retention crisis.

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References

¹ <https://www.bma.org.uk/news/2016/december/one-third-of-gp-vacancies-remain-unfilled>

² BMA 2016 GP Survey, <https://www.bma.org.uk/collective-voice/influence/key-negotiations/training-and-workforce/urgent-prescription-for-general-practice/key-issues-survey>