2030 – How the National Health Service became sustainable

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I am a medical student studying at Brighton and Sussex Medical School (BSMS) following a year working in Bredasdorp Hospital, South Africa, as well as hospitals in India and the UK. My interest in global health led this year to the position as President of the BSMS Friends of Médecins Sans Frontières society. I am also co-founder and co-president of the BSMS Recital Society, playing the violin and organising events. In my role as honorary midshipman in the Royal Naval Reserves I have represented the Royal Navy throughout Europe.

Summary

Judging the BHMA annual student essay prize proved a difficult task for the four judges. There were 11 entrants, all of whom entered into the spirit of imagining the year is 2030 and discussing how the NHS could become sustainable. Some were quite practical, some political, some saw climate change as the big threat, others the energy crisis. There were some creative and optimistic suggestions. In the end we awarded the prize of £250 to Thea Collins, a third year medical student from Brighton. However we were so impressed with all the entrants that we gave them all a year's free online membership of the BHMA.

Introduction

The development of a sustainable (NHS) over the last 30 years has been a tremendous environmental and sociological success story, catalysed by many significant changes. From an NHS based in a materialistic society of 'I want, I get', natural events, environmental and technological developments along with a complete reorganisation of the health system has transformed the attitude of British society itself. With global issues of sustainability becoming increasingly worrying, such as fast depleting oil supplies and global warming, it was this change of attitude that was crucial to the UK's success; changes that led ultimately to worldwide change. Health care is one of the most essential aspects of any great society and in the last 30 years the NHS has become without doubt the best 'free at the point of care' health service on the planet.

Understanding sustainability

Before 2015 the widely held view of how a sustainable world would look was one of strict control, low material standards of living and no enjoyment. The previous 50 years had seen advertising promoting a good life based on 'wild and wasteful consumption', deeply impacting on the ecology of the planet. This media seemed to create a nation of materialistic citizens who resented and demanded more from a government already in significant debt. The goal of sustainability was considered as a way to avoid catastrophe rather than to create a better world, and though spoken about often, rarely implemented in any way that would result in change.

This negative attitude in the majority of the UK population was a contributor to growing health issues. Obesity-related illness due to unhealthy lifestyles became a substantial drain on the NHS, and again media pressure contributed to an increase in eating disorders and depression as people failed to meet their expectations of the body beautiful.

Reasons for change

In 2011 the Secretary of State for the Environment, Caroline Spellman, introduced the Mainstream

Sustainable Development Package, a policy making sustainable development central to the way the government purchased goods and services and managed their own departments. In an uncertain economic climate she stated that 'Moving to a long-term, green and sustainable economy is essential if we are to rebuild our finances, improve our quality of life and protect our natural environments'. This innovative policy at the time went largely unnoticed.

The first major event in the years leading up to the NHS sustainability reforms was the 2012 heatwave in Europe, with temperatures reaching 39°C and an estimated 2,000 related deaths. Climate change became recognised as the most serious threat to life and health and wellbeing globally, and with extremes of heat and cold increasing every year this event provoked news and media coverage of the dangers of global warming. With 200 years of burning fossil fuels and in conjunction with deforestation there was little doubt we were experiencing the consequences. Despite this very little was done to prevent a these events becoming more common.

The second major event was in late January of 2014, when there was flooding throughout East Anglia, with water levels so high that some villages and towns were evacuated as vehicles and animals were swept away.

In February 2017 hurricane winds of up to 110mph (177km/h) ripped across the south of England costing over 800 lives, destroying homes, pulling up trees and injuring thousands. The storm lasted two days, fuelled from the sea, and cost an estimated £2.4 billion pounds in repairs. This natural event caused mass flooding of southern England and hundreds of thousands of people were left homeless, having lost everything. Over a million homes were without power for three days. A significant factor in the total damage of the 2017 storm was the rise in sea levels between 1990 and 2015 by half a meter secondary to melting the polar icecaps. This event devastated England and sparked an environmental revolution throughout Europe. Communities close to the ruined towns and villages showed charity, opening their houses and giving support to those who had lost everything. It was this sudden change in the attitude of society that led to the new forward-thinking nation of today.

questioned why our culture constantly and unthinkingly ridiculed our own dreams of a better world. He argued that by suppressing our hopes for a better future it has the effect of restricting our own abilities as individuals or indeed a society to accomplish greater things, as we have already convinced ourselves it is impossible. At any other time Dr Western's comments may have been overlooked, but with people so shocked from the 2017 disaster there was a revolution of new thought.

With repair work from the damage continuing, communities formed new links with the people they had offered shelter for. People helped one another and Cameron's 'Big Society' finally became a reality (though under new government), with people working together and for each other without payment or selfish motives. This led to the initial stages of the NHS Voluntary Community Health Programme (VCHP) – a voluntary group covering a range of ages that looked at increasing community 'wellness' rather than biological health, by giving emotional/social support through community activities such as gardening or walking in the community.

The Wellness Campaign

In 2018 a reorganisation of the NHS began, looking to change the way healthcare was run and make it more patient-orientated. The target-driven health service was curtailed, reducing managerial staff and freeing up healthcare staff which saved time and money. Then, looking at systems in countries such as Sweden, the Department of Health launched The Wellness Campaign in 2020 which was aimed at making healthcare not only about biological 'sickness', but the whole biopsychosocial wellness of individuals. It was based on evidence suggesting general wellness reduces illness. This included trying to improve happiness throughout the UK by encouraging the development of a more open, caring, friendly society, with communities supporting each other socially as well as with care and health programmes.

This policy also included extra support for NHS staff suffering from illnesses such as alcoholism, depression, anxiety and burnout. Looking after the staff is important for good patient care and the NHS is significantly more efficient with increased job satisfaction now that all

The reform of society and the NHS

Following the 2013–17 events, Dr Mark Western started publicly speaking out about society's effects on the NHS and had a vision of what he wanted the NHS to be. He felt that as a society we had become complacent with limited ambition. He

Figure 1   Illness-wellness continuum
Wellness-Illness Continuum [Online]. 2030 [Accessed 01 March 2030]. Available from:
http://nsafitness.com/wellness-illness-continuum/
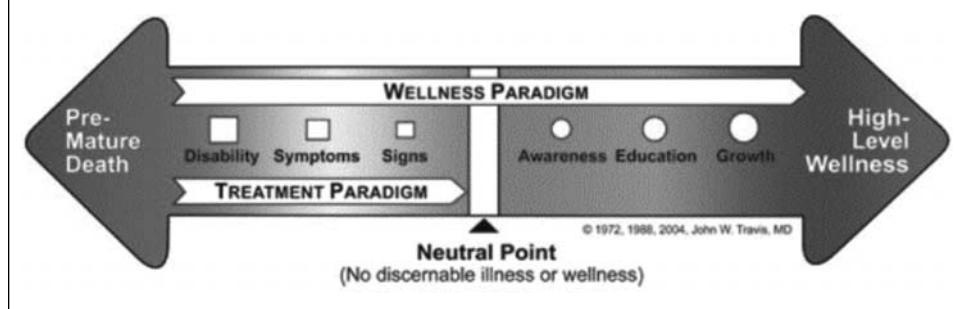
healthcare employees have access to an NHS staff care team of counsellors and advisors as well as tutor-based support networks.

The Wellness Campaign included free government-funded community weight-loss programmes to tackle rising UK obesity, looking at prevention rather than treatment of obesity-related disease such as diabetes. In 2021 the government passed a controversial new law regarding smoking, banning the selling of cigarettes to all under 18-year-olds, and increasing this age by one year every year. This 'phasing-out' of cigarettes, though initially highly contested, is thought to have saved the NHS over £5 billion pounds a year in future generation health costs, though there will be a time lag before we see these benefits. This move has been highly debated as people feel that it is their right to choose whether or not to smoke. The ban has not been implemented for everyone due to issues with nicotine addiction, but here there is the potential to save younger generations from lung disease and other smoking-related health problems.

Economic growth and development

In 2019 the invention of the bio-fuelled car started a revolution for British businesses. This fantastic development brought us out of the global struggle for oil and saved British people thousands of pounds. Government subsidised, petrol cars have almost completely been phased out in favour of bio-powered vehicles in only 11 years. This development has saved the NHS millions of pounds in transportation costs alone. Also increasing economic growth and reducing the need for foreign oil has been the mass development in plant oil industry. With the rise of the UK's summer temperature by 4°C in the last 50 years we have replaced foreign oil in medicines for oil grown from *Olea europaea* (olive oil). Using products from our own farms in the UK has benefited the British economy and many hospitals have started buying food locally which contributes to improved patient health and happiness.

The future

Though considerable changes have occurred within the NHS and British society in the last 20 years, further radical changes will have to continue sustainability in the next 20 years. Plans and policies such as The Wellness Campaign and smoking ban are only in their early stages and it will take time to realise the long-term benefits. New plans are being developed for solar- and wind-powered hospitals as well as energy-efficient architecture, such as buildings that catch and store water.

Conclusion

The once cynical British attitude towards sustainability has changed drastically in the last 20 years. We are now a nation of visionaries. It is unfortunate that it took such terrible natural damage in the UK for this to happen, but the resulting action, charity and development, particularly within healthcare, is incredible. Other countries are now following the example of the UK, increasing use of renewable energy, driving bio-fuelled vehicles and adopting more patient-centred health systems. Without envisioning a better NHS we could not have made it this far, but with sustained enthusiasm and support the NHS can continue be fully sustainable in the coming years.

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