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What's the future of healthcare in England? It's the NHS, stupid

The NHS now has a vision for the future which has broad political support.

Those who thought five year plans disappeared with the collapse of the Soviet Union would have been pleasantly surprised by Simon Stevens last month. The NHS Chief Executive set out his own Five Year Forward Plan, not for the economy of course, but for England's National Health Service.

And because of its vastness – its 2012/13 budget was an estimated £108.9 billion - what happens to the NHS broadly dictates the direction of health and social care in England.

Having spent a decade in private healthcare in the US, there were concerns Stevens may steer a course towards privatisation and outsourcing. However, he committed himself to a publicly funded service which would continue to oversee the majority of healthcare provision.

The report - produced by NHS England, Public Health England, the regulator Monitor, the NHS Trust Development Authority, Care Quality Commission and Health Education England – was short and impactful. In just 37 pages Stevens outlined how action was needed to be taken on four fronts to ensure the NHS continued to be fit for purpose. These included:

- Doing more to tackle the root causes of ill health
- Committing to give patients more control of their own care, including the option of combining health and social care, and new support for carers and volunteers
- Changing to meet the needs of a population that lives longer
- Developing and delivering the new models of care, local flexibility and more investment in our workforce,

technology and innovation

The report also examined the financial health of the NHS, highlighting a £30bn 'black hole' in funding. Stevens readily admitted the service needed to be run more efficiently, and outlined plans for £22bn of 'efficiency savings'. However, this still leaves £8bn unaccounted for, which the report suggests needs to be provided by central government.

There was no guarantee of this extra funding but crucially, as the battle begins for next year's election, the three main political parties have been quick to associate themselves with Stevens' vision. Put simply, supporting the NHS is a vote winner.

Liberal Democrat Care Minister Norman Lamb told the Daily Telegraph: "I think it's visionary, and it's very much in accordance with the Liberal Democrat's vision for the NHS."

Conservative Health Secretary Jeremy Hunt described the plan as "positive" and said the increased funding would be possible with a strong economy.

Labour's Andy Burnham used the report to attack the government and in doing so showed his support for its findings. He said "it showed the inadequacy of Tory funding plans for the NHS which, if left unchanged, would trigger an NHS crisis in the next parliament", while also claiming some of the proposals were ideas Labour had already suggested.

With at least one of these parties almost certain to be in government after May's General Election, Stevens' Forward Plan will steer the course for the NHS and healthcare in England over the next parliament. For anyone in the sector it is essential reading.

Nick Albrow, Account Manager
- PLMR



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