

What role do medical students have in shaping the future of the National Health Service?

By the time that this year's intake of medical students begin their foundation training, the National Health Service (NHS) will be over 70 years old. Its existence thus far has been tumultuous and often controversial, but demographic changes and economic pressures promise the next ten years will be the most important yet. So what role do these young professionals who will soon be entering the system have in shaping its future?

The changing demographic of the UK means that demand for health services is moving away from episodic care and towards long-term, community-based management. A report by professional services company Pricewaterhouse Coopers (PwC) envisions one of four futures of the NHS, based on sliding scales of the adaptability of the health service, and of the responsibility of patients and the public to be proactive about their own health and wellbeing. At one end of the spectrum, it foresees demand overtaking supply, culminating in a series of high profile safety failures. At the other, services will be 'high quality and efficient, with innovation to the fore, resulting in improved outcome for all'¹.

Medical students have a significant role to play in allowing the NHS to adapt, pushing it towards this optimal scenario. Patients are demanding 24/7 access to care, and professionals within the community and in hospital-based medicine must be willing to collaborate in order to achieve this goal. With a few notable exceptions, the current system is largely resistant to such a change, perhaps due to resources, but perhaps also due to long-standing norms. However, newer generations of young doctors have a unique insight into the NHS, having seen how it operates from an outsider's perspective, and their views can be moulded by an evolving educational system. Thus each successive intake of young doctors generates a new opportunity for lasting cultural transformation.

In 2013, in recognition of the need for more community-focused care, health secretary Andrew Lansley set a target for 50% of speciality training places to be taken by general practice (GP) registrars by 2015 – up from 41% in 2012. But it seems there is a gap between demand and supply of willing graduates. In 2013, just 20% of students chose general practice as their first choice after qualification. A ComRes survey of GPs earlier this year suggested that workload and a perceived lower status of general practice was the reason behind the lack of interest³. But with a scarcity of general practitioners in the workforce, pressures on individual GPs will only increase and a vicious circle begins to emerge. Budget makers must ensure that an appropriate proportion of funds is aimed at primary care to entice more students into the area, while the educational system as a whole will need to espouse the benefits of practicing community medicine to reflect evolving patient needs.

A further cultural problem is the hierarchical system of the NHS, which is often cited as reason for obstruction to change². Although students are technically at the bottom of this ladder, it could be argued that, without the constraints of employment contracts and the necessity of building long-term relationships with colleagues, they are in a unique position to point out systemic flaws and improvements in a way that employees of the NHS feel they cannot. What's needed going forward is to give students the confidence and willingness to speak up, and a well-publicised forum in which they can voice their ideas.

In order for political reforms to have any impact and to address the needs of the NHS however, medical students must take an interest in and be engaged in the process. While health professionals as individuals must allow politicians to make the difficult macro decisions on resource allocation, there must also be dialogue between these groups. Yet political engagement in the young is currently a problem. As a crude proxy, the last three UK general elections saw a turnout among 18-24 year olds averaging at 43.5% - down from 62.7% in the three before⁴. There is an onus not just on students themselves, but on politicians and the educational system to highlight the importance of political engagement for medical students, in order to ensure the NHS evolves in a way amenable to both parties.

In order to remain relevant to the public and able to compete with private services, the NHS will need to embrace technology – for example, the use of Twitter by NHS Direct and individual to improve the level of patient interaction. Today's students are among the first generations to grow up totally immersed in digital, and they are well placed to bring these skills into the health service and utilise this resource to its maximal potential. An example of where this is already happening are NHS 'hack days', networking events designed to bring together healthcare professionals and those with an interest in computing to develop new ideas to improve healthcare. At the end of last year, Queen's University Belfast ran a similar event aimed specifically at medical and computing students. New doctors who have grown up immersed in technology are in an excellent position to reform the NHS for the better in future.

The role of medical students in shaping the future of the NHS should not be underestimated. Young doctors are more malleable and arguably more open to the cultural, political and technological reforms needed to mould the health service into the form it needs to safely meet patient needs and have a future. Policymakers and NHS decision makers should not forget this, and must put in place the mechanisms required to give students a voice and the influence to make the NHS a more adaptable and relevant care system for the future.

References

1. PwC. *NHS@75: What the future might hold*. <http://www.pwc.co.uk/nhs75-report.pdf> (accessed 03.03.15).
2. Ham, C. *Reforming the NHS from within: Beyond hierarchy, inspection and markets*. The King's fund. http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/sites/files/kf/field/field_publication_file/reforming-the-nhs-from-within-kingsfund-jun14.pdf (accessed 03.03.15).
3. ComRes. *BBC Inside Out GPs Survey*. <http://comres.co.uk/polls/bbc-inside-out-gps-survey/> (accessed 03.03.15).
4. Dar, A. *Elections: Turnout*. House of Commons Library. www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN01467.pdf (accessed 03.03.15).