

Get the best from the NHS

by Sally Bundock

For most people their health and wellbeing, together with access to appropriate advice and treatment for illness when it arises, becomes more of an issue as the years pass. Consequently it is important to know quite what help is available from the NHS. It can only be useful to be aware of the facts and to have a plan in place to follow when the need for medical help arises.

When the NHS was launched by Aneurin Bevan in 1948, it was based on three core principles - that it meet the needs of everyone, be free at the point of delivery and be based on clinical need, not ability to pay. These principles have remained at its core since 1948. Today the NHS faces many challenges and hardly a day passes without press coverage of changes, problems and controversial issues. Aneurin Bevan was once asked how long the NHS would survive. He replied "As long as there are folk left with the faith to fight for it."

The main provisions of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 came into effect in April 2013. It fundamentally changed the way the NHS in England is organised and run. The last 2 years have seen much heated debate and controversy with improving the quality of care for patients and service users being the driving force behind the need for change.

The new structure of the NHS has seen the birth of new organisational bodies. Primary Care Trusts have been abolished and Clinical Commissioning

Groups (CCGs) are now the cornerstone of the new health system. Every GP practice in England is now part of a CCG. There are about 212 CCGs, each commissioning care for around 226,000 people. CCGs commission the majority of health services, including emergency care, elective hospital care and community and mental health services. In 2013/2014 they will be responsible for about 60% (some £65bn) of the NHS budget.

CCGs can commission any service provider that meets NHS standards and costs. These can be NHS hospitals, social enterprises, charities or private sector providers. However they must be assured of the quality of services commissioned, taking into account the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence (NICE) guidelines and Care Quality Commission (CQC) service provider data.

The Department of Health is no longer the headquarters of the NHS, nor will it directly manage any NHS organisations. It is responsible for strategic leadership of both health and social care systems. A new organisation, NHS England, an independent body at arm's length to the government, has the core role of improving health outcomes for people in England by driving up the quality of care and overseeing the operation of CCGs and allocating resources to them and other care services.

Each CCG has its own website and provides invaluable information on the provision of

healthcare in their local areas. Individuals can find their local CCG by contacting their GP or by visiting www.england.nhs.uk/resources/ccg-directory

New Health and Wellbeing Boards and Public Health England have their parts to play in supporting the changes in the NHS.

Since April 2013 some elements of the regulation system have changed. The CQC continues to regulate all health and adult social care services in England, including those provided by the NHS, local authorities, private companies and voluntary organisations. The CQC has been the subject of some criticism and in an effort to improve standards a new 'charter of rights' for patients is proposed, starting with hospitals.

Monitor has expanded its role to regulate all providers of health and adult social care services. It aims to promote competition, regulate prices and ensure the continuity of services for NHS Foundation Trusts. Under the new system most NHS service providers will need to be registered with the CQC and Monitor to legally provide services. They will need to meet essential standards of quality and safety, with the CQC and Monitor taking action if they default.

Monitor is the sector regulator for health services in England. They are there to protect and promote the interests of patients by ensuring the whole sector works

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for their benefit. They have an ongoing role in rigorously assessing NHS Trusts for Foundation Trust status. They must be confident and able to provide assurance to Parliament and a wide range of stakeholders that NHS Foundation Trusts will be legally constituted, financially sustainable, effectively governed and locally representative. NHS Foundation Trusts are not-for-profit, public health corporations. They are part of the NHS and provide over half of all NHS hospital, mental health and ambulance services. They were created to devolve decision making from central government to local organisations and communities in line with the NHS core principles. They are accountable to their local communities, their commissioners, Parliament (via annual report), the CQC and Monitor.

Healthwatch is the new independent consumer champion, operating at national and local level, gathering and representing the public's views and ensuring they are heard by the Secretary of State and relevant bodies.

The NHS continues to face serious challenges for the future

and for this reason NHS England has launched their 'NHS Call to Action' campaign. They are aware that there is too much unwarranted variation across the country and that at times the NHS fails to live up to the high expectations we have of it. Their aim is to raise performance across the board, placing greater emphasis on keeping people healthy and well in order to lead longer, more illness-free lives, preventing rather than treating illness.

There are a number of future pressures that need to be addressed. The population is aging and there is a significant increase in the number of people with long-term health conditions. Lifestyle behaviours such as poor diet and lack of exercise all contribute to future ill health as does the growing problem of obesity. These issues, together with the need to improve 24/7 health provision and our increasing expectations of the service, all represent an ever growing demand for NHS services.

The cost of providing care is getting more expensive with an ever expanding sophisticated range of treatments, procedures and drugs than ever before. At

the same time the UK's challenging economic situation means that the NHS budget is affected. The NHS needs to work smarter to keep pace with the demands placed upon it. The NHS stipulates that "The NHS belongs to the people" and in line with this principle NHS England's campaign will be consulting and working with all relevant bodies, staff, patients and the public to develop new local approaches to the NHS. The outcome of this extensive public discussion will be to develop 3-5 year CCG commissioning plans.

NHS England are quite adamant that doing nothing is not an option, that it is not reasonable to expect anything other than flat funding in the coming years and that cutting or charging for fundamental services or privatising the NHS are not options.

When one has health concerns of any kind it is always good to know where to go for reliable and useful information. Two really first rate websites exist to provide this - NHS Choices www.nhs.uk and www.patient.co.uk For those without access to a computer, from April 2013, 50 existing UK online centres in local settings, such as libraries and cafes are receiving additional funding to develop as digital health hubs where people will be able to find support to go online for the first time and use technology and information services such as these websites to help improve their health and wellbeing.

NHS Choices is the online 'front door' to the NHS. It is the country's biggest health website and gives all the information you need to make choices about your health. Included is information on a wide range of medical conditions and medicines – including how to report side effects under the YellowCard Scheme. There is a very useful

Symptoms Checker and an Information Prescription Service which tells you all you need to know about many conditions including links to the NICE Guidelines on treatment. A useful tool enables you to find your local hospitals and GPs and view their Friends and Family and Patient ratings. You can read about the latest health news and clinical trials and if you wish join HealthUnlocked - the NHS Choices on-line communities facility where you can exchange ideas e.g. Connect with Others with Anxiety. The site also includes the Any Qualified Provider scheme enabling patients to choose an approved provider.

Also on the website you can view "The NHS Constitution" which details the NHS's principles and values and the rights and responsibilities of patients, the public and staff. Another important document is the "2013/14 Choice Framework" which provides valuable information on your legal rights within the NHS and how to complain if necessary.

www.patient.co.uk is the UK's leading independent health site run by experienced GPs. It is a trusted source of information for both patients and health professionals nationwide. It contains over 4,000 health information leaflets, a wellbeing centre, a free health check and numerous discussion forums. The site includes a symptom checker and a very useful directory of organisations including a link to www.turn2us.org.uk which provides information on benefits and grants.

Not everyone has access to a computer. However, increasingly GPs are printing off information from the above websites for their patients.

If you are comfortable with your current GP surgery, then all is well and good. If, however, you have any thoughts about moving surgeries then take time and consider the matter very carefully. The NHS Choices website will provide valuable information if you wish to compare your local GP practices. It is worth noting that a recent poll by the Royal College of General Practitioners found the 258 respondents anticipating longer waiting times for appointments and challenging times ahead in maintaining standards because of the current NHS funding squeeze.



GP practices vary in size with some GPs being part of a polyclinic or GP-led health centre. A typical polyclinic houses GPs and nurses and provides many of the services found in hospitals. The GP surgery is open 7 days a week. A nurse-led Walk-in Clinic is usually provided and is open to non-registered patients. In 2009 the first 7 polyclinics were opened in London. GP-led health centres are similar to polyclinics in that they are open 7 days per week and offer a Walk-in Clinic but they do not provide as large a range of facilities as polyclinics.

The issue of polyclinics has been one of controversy with sound

arguments for and against. There is evidence to suggest that they can work well and are well established in Germany and other European countries. However, plans to increase numbers of polyclinics in this country are currently on hold.

If you are away from home and need to see a GP then you are able to visit any local GP or Walk-in Clinic. You may, however, feel that you would like to consider consulting a GP privately. There are a number of organisations that provide this facility but one needs to remember that the GP

will not initially know you personally or have your medical history to hand. A consultation can, however, be useful especially for a situation which requires a one off visit. A GP consulted privately will not be able to make a referral to an NHS specialist.

Private GP consultations may be arranged via Bupa www.bupa.co.uk 0845 619 2961 almost anywhere nationwide. The cost is around £70 for 15 minutes or £128 for 30 minutes. Some other large healthcare providers offer a similar service. Smaller organisations also offer private consultations at similar cost but

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with limited area coverage, mainly in large towns. CityDoc www.moorgatemd.co.uk 0845 0260 830 operate in London and Birmingham with additional facilities for vaccinations and screening. Samedaydoctor www.samedaydoctor.co.uk 020 7631 0090 operate on a franchise basis at locations around the UK including Edinburgh. The Broadgate Clinic www.broadgategp.co.uk 020 7382 0505 is a modern private polyclinic in London offering private GP appointments at a competitive cost of £65 with no charge for follow-up appointments within 48 hours.

Doctorcall www.doctorcall.co.uk 0844 257 0345 offer a private GP service in London and Manchester and will source a GP if requested in another area. In London they also offer a call out service aiming to have a doctor with the patient within 90 minutes. The cost ranges from around £155 during the day to £215 at night.

A further on-line resource is www.justanswer.co.uk where you can ask any question of an expert, medical or otherwise. They will immediately engage in a written dialogue with you. The cost, payable by credit/debit card, is £20+.

So if you need non-urgent help out of your GP surgery hours who should you call? Well currently it depends on where you live. In some areas the new 111 service is operating, whilst in others NHS Direct is still the number to call on 0845 4647 until the new service is established. If you dial the NHS Direct number and your area has moved to 111 you will be asked to re-dial 111.

When you call the 24/7 NHS 111 helpline, your call should be answered by one of a number of 'highly-trained' advisers supported by experienced

nurses. The adviser will assess your case and facilitate further advice or call an ambulance if necessary. There has been much negative press associated with the new 111 service including inadequate training of advisers, delays and insufficient clinicians available to take calls. However, in some areas the service is operating well and much effort is being made to rectify the problems. With 46 different contracts in place it is inevitable that it will take some time to ensure that the service offered to all is consistent and reliable.

For those who have private medical insurance, it is likely that a 24/7 GP/nurse helpline is part of the package. There is also a less expensive option, that of Benenden Health www.benenden.co.uk 0800 414 8011. Benenden currently costs £7.80 per month and there is no upper age restriction or exclusion for pre-existing medical conditions. Among membership benefits is a 24/7 GP Helpline and after 6 months membership you can request up to £1,500 for prompt, local consultations and tests and prompt treatment and surgery at one of their approved hospitals.

With the hospital system as a whole being under pressure, CCGs are working towards encouraging people to manage health issues where appropriate and safe to do so without visiting A & E. This is to ensure that there is sufficient resource to deal with urgent cases.

Some hospitals have Minor Injuries Units with core operating times and work well for non urgent issues. However, if you need to visit A & E it is worth considering in advance, if you have a number of hospitals near you, which might be the most suitable - bearing in mind the visit may result in a hospital admission. Information on

hospitals may be found on the NHS Choices website which links through to the CQC ratings. A visit to A & E works best if the patient takes details of their medications with them and is accompanied by a friend or family member who is able to speak up on their behalf if necessary. Many people have very positive experiences in A & E but it must be remembered Departments are not always fully staffed and that doctors and nurses are often working long hours. By and large they do a difficult job very well indeed but like their patients they are only human and so one should not be afraid to ask for clarification or question anything should the need arise.

The NHS in the UK works pretty well despite current pressures, with largely only the bad news reaching the media. Recent research by Saga showed little difference between NHS and private health care with respect to clinical care but with a wider variation with respect to the softer aspects of care such as communication with clinicians and waiting times.

As a nation we are living longer than ever before. The demands made upon the NHS are increasing and so it is more important than ever that we each play our part by keeping ourselves as fit and healthy as possible. When a health problem arises we need to try to make the best decision on where to seek help. Can the local pharmacist help? Should 111/NHS Direct be called or a visit to a GP/Walk-in Centre be made? Is a visit to a Minor Injuries Unit or A & E appropriate? Finally if it is an emergency then 999 should be dialled without delay.

The NHS belongs to everyone and we must all do our very best to help it operate as smoothly as possible for the greater good.