

THE BIG QUESTION

THIS MONTH WE ASK

“How
sustainable
is the NHS?”





Fiona Carragher

Deputy Chief Scientific Officer for England
NHS England

The Five Year Forward View has identified that the NHS is clearly sustainable for the long term, if we can tackle the three big gaps – care and quality, health and wellbeing, finance and efficiency. We also need a step-change in prevention to move the burden of disease from late-stage ill health, which takes a toll on patients and NHS resources, to prognostics and early disease.

The bigger question is how to address these issues to close these gaps. The biomedical scientists and their colleagues running diagnostic services are central to achieving this. Diagnostic services pick up patients on their journey and direct them to the most appropriate place as promptly as possible. Ensuring these services work at the cutting edge of science, and capture and combine information to better characterise patients, so reducing inefficiencies through duplication of testing or slower treatment can make the world of difference to services.

From my own professional practice as a Director of Screening, I've seen the real difference that scientist-led screening programmes can make to the quality of people's lives, and the level of contact they require from the NHS. Picking up conditions early, where the treatment and management options are much greater for individuals, does make the world of difference. We need to ensure we can deliver technological advances in this area as soon as possible to make maximum impact.



Barry Hill


Former Blood Transfusion Manager
Southport and Ormskirk Hospital NHS Trust

Sustainable means continuing over a long period of time, without depletion or permanent damage. Well, that's been a fairly accurate depiction of the NHS to date, now approaching 70 years since inception, with its founding principle of free access to healthcare for all. But how much longer can the NHS survive in its present form? Current NHS pressures, such as an ageing population, increased demand on services and the need for savings, improvements and modernisation have seen the NHS on the ropes recently, but major challenges to the NHS are not a new phenomenon. As someone who up until recently worked in NHS pathology services for over 40 years, I have witnessed many changes, some good, some bad, and have also seen many wheels re-invented and then go full circle. This is particularly true in pathology, where the rounds of mergers and reconfigurations seem to be accelerating yet further again under the Sustainability and Transformation Plans (STPs). It remains to be seen whether STPs will result in success or failure, but doing nothing is not an option. So, is the NHS sustainable? Yes, because it would be unthinkable for it not to be and its greatest asset – its workforce – will play a key role in this going forward, just as it has always done. As NHS founder Aneurin Bevan said: "We shall never have all we need, expectations will always exceed capacity, the service must always be changing, growing and improving – it must always appear inadequate."



Hedley Glencross

Advanced Specialist Biomedical Scientist
Portsmouth Hospitals NHS Trust

The NHS is actually embedded in the UK psyche and people are willing to pay more tax to keep it going. But with the current funding and service delivery model, it is being kept going by the good will of people like myself who are willing to go the extra mile, step up and make sure the work is done. I think it is sustainable – I don't think there's any other choice, but there need to be discussions about the delivery models. 

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