

NHS Pay

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

It is a pleasure to follow Dr Whitford. I pay tribute to her for her work on the Select Committee on Health in the previous Parliament. That work was inevitably full of expertise and always constructive; I thank her for that. I agree with her that the NHS is a team, but that team should also include the wider social care staff because we cannot continue to look at the two systems in isolation. I echo her point, thanking all our NHS and care staff for the contribution they make not just to our wider economy, but—most importantly—to patients. Those are the people we should keep at the heart of this debate.

I welcome this debate. I also welcome the relaxation of the cap because we need to give the NHS Pay Review Body greater flexibility to make recommendations about what we need to put in place for our NHS staff. I agree with the hon. Member for Central Ayrshire that we should look at the impact of pay on morale, recruitment and retention—this is an international workforce, as well as a national one—but we also need to look at pay across regions and within specialties because there is great variation. We should focus our efforts on ensuring that we are looking at the situation from the patients' perspective by, for example, looking at the greatest areas of deprivation, which very often have the lowest ratios of NHS and care staff and who are under the greater pressure.

Seven years of sustained pressure on NHS pay is taking a toll. Nobody anticipated that it would go on for this long, so it is time to relax the cap. We should look not just at the issue of pay, but at the wider pressures within the NHS. I am delighted to announce that the Health Committee, which held its first meeting just before Prime Minister's Question Time, has agreed that its first inquiry of the Parliament will be on the nursing workforce. We will look not just at pay, but at the wider workforce pressures, including the increased workload that comes from increasing demand across the system, morale and all the other non-pay issues that contribute to the pressures on nurses. We will also look at bursaries and the new routes into nursing, and at their impact on people entering the nursing workforce. We have heard about that already today. For example, we know that those who drop out of nursing courses are more likely to be in the younger age groups, whereas those who go into nursing as mature students are much more likely to stay. We need to look at all those wider impacts.

Maria Caulfield Conservative, Lewes

I really welcome the news that the Select Committee is going to do a review of nursing. Will the Committee look into pay structure? The current Agenda for Change structure is being used by some trusts, in hospitals and communities, as a way of downgrading nursing roles. For example, a senior sister in one place may be paid a band 7 salary, whereas someone in the same role somewhere not too far down the road may be paid a band 5 salary. There is inequity in the current system.

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

That is an important point. I very much hope that my hon. Friend will contribute to the Committee's inquiry. As well as looking at the new routes into nursing, we will look at the skills mix, roles within health and social care more widely, the impact of Brexit and language testing, workload and morale. We will be seeking contributions from hon. Members across the House and from people outside.

As I said, we will miss something if we just look at the issue as one of pay. Pay restraint is estimated to contribute between Â£3.3 billion and Â£3.5 billion of the five year forward view efficiency savings up to 2019-20. If that goes, what will fill the gap? We have to be careful that there is no loss of services or losses in the workforce, because workforce pressures—probably more than any other issue—contribute to nursing staff leaving the profession. We have to look at the bigger picture.

Eleanor Smith Labour, Wolverhampton South West

I have been a nurse for 40 years, but this is not just about nursing. There are other groups as well, including occupational therapists and physiotherapists, who are also registered professionals. Along with everybody else, they are just as important as nurses.

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

The hon. Lady is absolutely right. Look, for example, at the applications for nursing courses. Even though the number of applicants has gone down, it may not ultimately result in a loss of numbers entering nursing. Some of the applicants from that overall drop in numbers might have gone on to other courses, so we need to look at the bigger picture. In opting to look at the nursing workforce, the Health Committee is not saying in any way that other parts of the workforce are not important. The NHS is a team, but it would be difficult for us to report within a certain timeframe if we looked at the entire workforce. I have no doubt that we will look at other aspects of the workforce over the course of this Parliament. I assure the hon. Lady that we will not lose sight of the bigger picture and I hope that she will contribute to the inquiry.

We need to look at the big picture regarding the total budget for health and social care. Norman Lamb has long made this point, and we have both made it clear that it is time for us to take a cross-party approach to sustainable funding for health and social care in the long term. I look forward to working with him on that over the course of this Parliament.

Norman Lamb Liberal Democrat Spokesperson (Health), Chair, Science and Technology Committee (Commons)

I totally agree with the hon. Lady and I am keen to continue working with her. Did she see the Independent Age survey that showed that well over 80% of Members of Parliament on both sides of the House agree that there needs to be a cross-party settlement for the future of the NHS and the care system?

Sarah Wollaston Chair, Health Committee

I welcome that and I look forward to working with the right hon. Gentleman over the coming months to try to encourage colleagues on both sides of the House, including the Front Benches, to agree to the idea. Next year is the 70th anniversary of the NHS, and I cannot think of anything more constructive we could do than to work across political parties in order to deliver sustainable long-term funding for health and social care.

I will bring my remarks to a close because I know that many hon. Members wish to speak. I look forward to hearing suggestions from colleagues in the House and outside this place about the points they would like the Health Committee's inquiry into the nursing workforce to cover.