

QUESTION TIME

The National Health Service - From Cradle to Grave

History of the NHS

The National Health Service or NHS as it is more commonly known, was set up on the 5th July 1948 to provide healthcare for all citizens, based on need, not the ability to pay.

The NHS is funded by the taxpayer and managed by the Department of Health, which sets overall policy on health issues. It is the responsibility of the Department of Health to provide health services to the general public through the NHS.

It was launched as a single organisation based around 14 regional hospital boards. This new NHS was originally split into three parts:

- hospital services
- family doctors, dentists, opticians and pharmacists
- local authority health services, including community nursing and health visiting

Since 1948 there have been huge changes to both the organisational structure of the NHS and the way that patient services are provided.

NHS Core Principles

Changes in the way services are delivered and in the way patients are treated have been happening continuously in the NHS since it was first set up in 1948. It was not until the publication of the NHS Plan in July 2000, however, that this steady pace of change gave way to a full-scale modernisation program designed to totally transform the NHS and the way it cares for patients.

Although the NHS Plan marks a radical move towards a patient-centred health service, at its core lies a continuing commitment to the founding principles of the NHS. These can be summed up as:

The provision of quality care that:

- Meets the needs of everyone
- Is free at the point of need
- And is based on a patient's clinical need, not their ability to pay

The organisation of the NHS is unlike that of most other western health systems, as the ultimate responsibility lies with government and the responsible minister (the Secretary of State for Health). From 1948 until 1974 the organisational structure was unchanged. Since then there has been a series of modifications every few years under both Labour and Conservative governments. Generally management systems have been hierarchical with the Department of Health at the apex, and been based upon the idea of one district hospital for each area. Hospital medicine has usually been separate from the organisation of primary care, and remains so. During the successive reorganisations senior managers have often retired - or been culled - those remaining or promoted feeling insecure, and of low morale. At the beginning of the 1990s the Conservatives introduced market features to the NHS, separating providers from purchasers and introducing an element of competition. Labour has reversed many of these changes, moved the system to something far more like managed health care, but around 2002 began to re-introduce ideas such as patient choice.

Finance

When the NHS was set up, every working person was required to pay National Insurance. This was an amount per person per week which was collected by the Government and was used to fund the new NHS. The employer also pays a contribution. These payments continue to be taken from each working person and their employer, though it would be difficult now to say how far this pays for the NHS.

You have to pay national insurance contributions while you are working and under pension age. You do not pay them if you are under 16, and you stop paying them when you are 60 (if you are a woman) or 65 (if you are a man). If you are a man between 60 and 65 and you are not working, you may be able to get national insurance credits

There are five different classes of national insurance contributions. The class you pay depends on whether you are an employee, self-employed or you are paying contributions voluntarily to make up gaps in your contribution record. There are also contributions which employers have to make in respect of each employee.

Class 1 contributions

You have to pay Class 1 national insurance if you are an employee under state pension age (60 or 65). Your employer also pays Class 1 contributions for each employee. Both your contributions and your employer's contributions are deducted from your wages by your employer. Each time you are paid, you should get an itemised pay statement showing the deductions which have been made from your wages. An employer has to make these deductions and pay national insurance to HMRC. It is illegal not to do so. The NHS is funded almost entirely from central taxation, with only small contributions from users and from other sources. The money available to the service is therefore determined almost entirely by central government decision, and funds for health care compete with the requirements of welfare, education, the roads and the other calls upon government funds. The state of the economy sets the framework for funding decisions, which are taken after regular consultation between the Treasury and the Department of Health. The NHS is therefore "cash-limited" and not driven by demand. Demand is constrained by supply. The NHS probably makes more efficient use of its resources than most other countries, and aims for equitable provision. However various forms of rationing and demand management have always been a feature of the NHS.

Doctors - General Practitioners (GPs)

These doctors provide medical services in their local area and are usually the first contact point for most people when they have medical problems. GPs deal with both preventative and reactive issues i.e. they screen the health of the local population as well as dealing with specific problems. They will usually work with a number of other GPs at a particular base in the community. They will carry out minor tests and may even do minor surgery. They will prescribe appropriate drugs/medicine and will issue the patient with a prescription, which the patient takes to a pharmacy to get the drugs/medicine. GPs have a number of people who are registered with them. These are the people who the GP will treat. They will not see those who are not on their register. So it is important to register with a GP in your area before you need to see a GP.

If the patient needs tests or surgery that the GP cannot provide, he/she will refer the patient to the appropriate doctor at the local hospital (see below).

There is no payment required for going to see a GP.

Dentists

Usually work at separate premises from the GPs. Looks after the patients teeth and associated items. Like the GP, you have to register with a dentist so that he will look after your teeth.

There are set charges that a dentist now makes for an inspection and for the different work which he undertakes. So a visit to the dentist will require a payment.

Opticians

An optician will check the state of your eyesight and prescribe appropriate glasses or contact lenses. An optical test is a set price. The prescription can be taken to any dispensing optician. These are usually national retailers e.g. Specsavers, Vision Express, etc., though there are still some independent opticians. The glasses or contact lenses will have to be paid for. Optical tests are more and more being done at national retailers.

Pharmacies

Dispense the drugs and medicines prescribed by GPs. Most GP surgeries have a pharmacy close by. There is a set price for the drugs/medicines which must be paid to the pharmacist.

Most of their business is related to the prescriptions that the GPs write. They will also sell 'over-the-counter' drugs and medicines which do not require a prescription. You pay for these in the usual way. Pharmacists are able to give advice about such drugs/medicines and their use.

Hospitals

In each area of the country there is a local hospital which serves that area. They will often have Accident and Emergency Departments (A & E) which are the first place to go to if you have an accident (e.g. fall and break an arm). Treatment in A & E is free. A & E Departments are usually very busy places and deal with those who come on a need basis. So there can be a long wait to be dealt with. Patients are usually referred to a hospital by GPs or through A & E. If you need to be treated in hospital, the treatment is free. If you need to stay in hospital, both the treatment and the food, bed etc. are provided free.