THE NHS PROVIDERS VIEW: SEVEN-DAY SERVICES

INTRODUCTION

Introducing a ‘seven-day health service’ is a major priority for the government. It was a key element of the Conservative Party’s manifesto ahead of the 2015 general election.

The ambition behind the government’s commitment is to ensure that “people can get the access they need to GP services” throughout the week and that “people in need of hospital care at weekends, both those with emergency needs and those already in hospital, get the same high quality of care as they would during the week.”

To make this ambition a reality, the NHS will need to overcome a number of barriers such as ensuring the right number of staff, as well as diagnostic services, are available at weekends and that there is greater provision of weekend out-of-hospital care. In addition, the three main NHS staff contracts – for consultants, junior doctors and the agenda for change contract covering one million NHS staff – will need to be reformed, updated and modernised.

This document outlines NHS Providers’ view on the policy and what needs to happen before it can be implemented. NHS Providers is the membership organisation for the NHS acute, ambulance, community and mental health services that treat patients and service users in the NHS. NHS Providers has 96 per cent of all trusts in membership, collectively accounting for £65 billion of annual expenditure and employing more than 928,000 staff.

OUR VIEW

The secretary of state for health, the Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP, and others have made a persuasive case for the introduction of seven-day services. A number of NHS trusts already deliver many services seven days a week and report a wide range of benefits for patients. These include more consistent care, more rapid discharge of patients from hospital, fewer readmissions, shorter length of stay and, overall, a better patient experience.

We therefore support the ambition of extending NHS services to run seven days a week by 2020, but a number of barriers need to be overcome before this ambition can be realised.

Barriers to implementation

First, the NHS needs a clear definition of what is meant by seven-day services as this broad catch-all title can mean many different things. The NHS services, seven days a week forum, chaired by Prof Sir Bruce Keogh (of which NHS Providers was part), has identified 10 clinical standards to improve the quality of care and which define what seven-day services should achieve for patients admitted to hospital in an emergency. Four of these have been prioritised as a ‘must do’ for all hospitals by 2020. These are supported by the Academy of Medical Royal Colleges. We would note that, despite this work, there is still considerable confusion in the NHS about what is meant by seven-day services, and the path to delivering it, suggesting that more intensive communication and engagement with the service and its staff is needed.
Second, the government will need to ensure the right staffing and funding levels are available to support the introduction of seven-day services and to ensure that services on other days of the week are not compromised by spreading resource too thinly over seven days. Early work suggests that more funding and staff are needed in hospital to ensure effective introduction of seven day services: typically 1.5% to 2% of total income or, expressed another way, a 5% to 6% addition to the cost of emergency admissions.

There is a clear and widening gap between what the NHS is required to deliver and the funding available, before the consistent, universal, introduction of seven-day services. Overall NHS funding increases drop significantly from 2017/18 – against this backdrop, it’s impossible to see how the NHS can deliver seven-day services on the current staffing and funding levels the NHS has available. The government needs to work with providers to establish what extra staff and resources are required to ensure safe, sustainable and effective implementation of seven-day services for patients.

Third, the work of the seven-day services forum, and surveys of the NHS trusts in our membership, suggests that changes to all the three main NHS staff contracts will be needed to support the consistent introduction of seven-day services. This is particularly needed to make working over weekends and out of hours more affordable, while not compromising patient safety. That is why NHS Providers has consistently supported and will continue to support the reform and modernisation of all three main staff contracts: those affecting consultants, junior doctors and the more than one million staff covered by agenda for change, including nurses.

Finally, if seven-day services are to become a reality we also need to reform the wider health and care system, not just hospitals. There is no point getting patients clinically ready for discharge from hospital more quickly if they cannot access the community and social care support they need across seven days.