The public health white paper

Choosing health: making healthy choices easier

Summary

The white paper encompasses the Government’s view that people should make their own choices about their lifestyle, and consequently their health, but that these choices should be informed by good information and advice about the choices available.

The NHS will help, support and encourage people to choose healthy lifestyles.

Alongside the publicised issues such as smoking bans, the white paper includes measures to promote public health and tackle health inequalities.

The priorities for action are:

• reducing the number of smokers
• reducing obesity and improving diet and nutrition
• increasing exercise
• encouraging sensible drinking
• improving sexual health
• improving mental health.

Context

While there have been big improvements in health and life expectancy over the last century, new challenges have to be met if society is to continue to benefit from longer and healthier lives. The threat of childhood death from illness is falling and the big infectious killer diseases of the last century have mostly been defeated, but the relative proportion of deaths from cancer, coronary heart disease and stroke has risen. These now account for around two-thirds of all deaths and there are some worrying pointers for the future:

• Smoking remains the biggest single preventable cause of ill-health and there are still more than ten million smokers in the country.
• As many as one in ten sexually active young women may be infected with chlamydia, which can cause infertility.

The Government has published its much-heralded white paper on public health, Choosing health. The paper is based on the principle that the NHS should improve health and prevent disease, not just provide treatment for those who are ill. According to the Secretary of State for Health, “Now is the right time to refocus the NHS to tackle the causes of ill-health and reduce inequalities”.

Consultations that formed part of the process of developing the white paper showed that people want to take responsibility for their own health, but they expect the Government to support them in making their choices. Choosing health sets out the key principles of that support.

The white paper covers actions that need to be taken by government, health organisations and other bodies. This Briefing concentrates on the aspects that are most relevant to health organisations.
Surveys carried out since 1974 show an increase in the mental health problems experienced by young people.

Suicide remains the most common cause of death in men under 35.

Around one-third of all attendances at hospital A&E departments are estimated to be alcohol related.

Many of the choices that affect people's health are choices they make as consumers. The consultation preceding the white paper generated a wide debate about how to make choosing health an easier option for consumers.

The Department of Health (DH) will lead on action to promote health by influencing people's attitudes to the choices they make through a strategy that extends across health and involves a broad range of government departments and agencies. It will appoint an independent body to implement the strategy on its behalf. The focus will be on:

- **sexual health** – with a new national campaign targeted particularly at younger men and women
- **obesity** – with a new cross-government campaign to raise awareness of the risks of obesity
- **smoking** – with more campaigning to reduce smoking rates
- **alcohol** – by working to cut down binge drinking.

A new telephone, internet and digital television service called Health Direct will provide easily accessible and confidential information on health choices. This will be set up from 2007 and will include links to existing services. The Chief Medical Officer's programme of expert briefings to the media will be expanded and an independent national centre for media and health will be set up to discuss major health issues with regional and national media.

**Tackling inequalities**

It is important to get information about healthy choices to groups who may not find it easy to use information designed to meet the needs of the general population. Providers of local services will need to:

- tailor information and advice to meet people's needs, and support staff to communicate complex health information to different groups
- provide practical support for people who lack basic skills, to help them use health information.

The Skilled for Health programme, which provides practical help in managing situations such as making an appointment with a doctor, will be expanded. There will be new funding to enable every primary care trust (PCT) to run at least one local Skilled for Health programme each year by 2007.

**Children and young people – starting on the right path**

The white paper sets out actions to support children and young people, as well as their parents, families, carers and staff in the public and voluntary sectors. The actions aim to:

- reduce infant mortality
- support all children and young people in attaining good physical and mental health
- reduce inequalities in opportunities for children to make healthy choices
- ensure children and young people develop a good understanding of how they can balance the opportunities and risks involved in choices that impact on their health.

The white paper reasserts the need for PCTs to be fully involved with the arrangements contained in the Children Bill and to contribute advice and support in taking action to promote the health of children and young people. It also covers the role of children's centres in bringing together a range of services, including health services.
The standards that PCTs should follow in planning, commissioning and delivering services for children are set out in the National Service Framework (NSF) for children, young people and maternity services.

Immunisation
The white paper recognises more work is needed to make sure that the immunisation programme reaches vulnerable children and adults.

Personal health guides
Children's health guides are being introduced as part of the new child health promotion programme that is part of the NSF for children. As they grow up, every child will take on responsibility for developing their own health goals with help from a range of people including health professionals.

School nursing services
School nursing services will be modernised, increasing the number of qualified staff working with primary and secondary schools so that by 2010 every cluster of schools will have access to a team led by a qualified school nurse. There will be new funding for PCTs to deliver this expanded service.

Health visiting services
Health visitors will oversee the delivery of the new child health promotion programme. Working in children's centres, in conjunction with Sure Start local programmes and through links with local voluntary and community providers, they will focus particularly on vulnerable and disadvantaged children and parents, for example teenage parents.

Maternity services
From 2005, eligible pregnant women, breastfeeding mothers and young children in low-income families will be provided with vouchers that can be exchanged for fresh fruit and vegetables, milk and infant formula through a new scheme called Healthy Start. Infant formula milk will no longer be available from healthcare premises.

Health professionals will have a role in the Healthy Start scheme, providing information and support to families on breastfeeding, child nutrition and other health issues. A communications and training programme for health professionals will be introduced alongside the scheme.

Targeting advice and support
The DH is developing a resource – You’re welcome – to support PCTs in making NHS services easy to use and trusted by young people. This will be published early in 2005.

From 2006, the DH will pilot health services dedicated to, and designed around the needs of, young people.

Local communities leading for health
Choosing health looks at how factors such as the environment, social networks and income affect health. This is the section of the white paper that covers the proposals to ban smoking in enclosed public places and workplaces.

The Government will support new ‘five a day’ initiatives in deprived communities, aimed at increasing the consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables. From 2006, more PCTs will provide support for cookery clubs and food co-ops to encourage healthy eating, and ‘healthy community’ collaboratives will be extended to new areas.

A new National Strategic Partnership Forum is being set up to help promote health through co-operation between the NHS and the voluntary sector, and revised guidance on health and community renewal will be published in 2005.

Beginning in spring 2005, the DH will pilot Communities for Health, a new approach to promoting action on local priorities for health by the voluntary sector, local authorities, business and industry.

From 2006, through the Public Health Observatories, the DH will publish new reports for local communities based on a standard set of local health information. These reports will include information on different groups in the population.

PCTs and local authorities will have more flexibility to develop local confidential e-mail service offered by trained sexual health advisers.
targets through local partnership, in response to local needs. Local Area Agreements will be piloted in 21 areas from 2005 to ensure the local delivery of national targets and, from April 2005, PCTs will develop targets, agreed with partners, to meet the needs of people living in their area. These will meet the national targets set by Choosing health and the NHS Improvement Plan.

Smoke-free public places
By the end of 2006, all government departments and NHS premises (subject to limited exceptions) will be smoke-free.

Personal health trainers
Choosing health details the support that will be available to help people make and carry out the right decisions for their own health. The main proposal is for what the white paper calls ‘a new kind of personal health resource – NHS trainers’. These health trainers will be the ‘fundamental building blocks for health improvement in the NHS’.

From 2006, NHS-accredited health trainers will give support to people who want it, in the areas with the highest need. From 2007 they will be operating progressively across the country. The new services will be developed first in deprived communities. PCTs and children’s trusts, working with community organisations, health professionals and local authorities, will agree how best to provide this support to reach even the most deprived groups.

Health trainers will often come from local communities. Accredited by the NHS, they will offer practical advice and connect with locally available services and support. Individuals will be able to contact their health trainer through their local health centre, walk-in centre or by contacting NHS Direct. Health trainers will help people develop personal health guides – another new initiative – and offer people a health ‘stock-take’ so they can see how their way of life might be affecting their health.

A health-promoting NHS
The white paper argues that the NHS, as it tackles treatment waiting times successfully, will increasingly become a health improvement and prevention service. Without this change the NHS will ‘have to run ever faster to stand still’ as a growing proportion of its budget would need to be spent on coping with chronic conditions such as diabetes and heart disease.

Improving health, identifying risk and preventing disease will be achieved through:

- ensuring that the one and a half million contacts people have with the NHS every day become opportunities for improving and promoting health
- developing local services designed around the needs of local communities, with a particular focus on those in the most disadvantaged groups and areas
- developing the same systematic approaches to health improvement and disease prevention services that are already transforming NHS treatment services.

The white paper identifies a range of national and local activity, including the following:

- Each national clinical director will work with clinical communities to identify where there may be scope to extend primary and secondary prevention in their clinical areas, agree the most important steps to be taken, and set out how progress can be assessed.
- The national clinical directors, with the deputy Chief Medical Officer, will make recommendations by March 2005 on how to build a comprehensive and integrated framework across all the areas covered by the NSFs. Locally, PCTs will need to consider how far current arrangements for delivery of NSFs meet the new framework.
- PCTs will receive funding to give greater priority to areas of high health need.
- There will be new investment in primary care facilities for 50 per cent of the population by 2008.
- A tool to assess local health and well-being will be developed to help PCTs and local authorities jointly plan services.
- From 2006, NHS ‘stop smoking’ services will be offered on the new ‘choose and book’ system.
- The DH is working to embed an offer of smoking cessation advice as part of clinical assessment in surgical care pathways from 2006.
- A national health competency framework will be developed to give NHS staff training and support to develop their understanding of and skills in promoting health.
The DH will encourage and expand a comprehensive range of community health improvement services that includes specialist practitioners.

• Community matrons will take the lead in providing personalised care and health advice – by 2008 there will be 3,000 community matrons who will take on responsibility for case-managing patients with complex health problems.

Mental health
Transforming the NHS from a sickness service to a health service also involves promoting mental well-being. New approaches will be developed to help people with mental illnesses manage their own care and aspects of their health.

Smoking
The Healthcare Commission will assess local progress in reducing smoking. A national task force will be set up to support efficiency and best practice in NHS smoking cessation services (see page 4).

Tackling obesity
By 2007, NICE will prepare definitive guidance on the prevention, identification, management and treatment of obesity.

Sexually transmitted infections
New capital and revenue funding will help to modernise the whole range of NHS sexual health services, communicate better with people about risk, offer more accessible services and provide faster access to treatment. By March 2007, a national screening programme for chlamydia will cover all areas of England, and by 2008 patients referred to a GUM clinic will be able to have an appointment within 48 hours.

Reducing harm caused by alcohol
Guidance and training will help all NHS professionals to identify alcohol problems early.

Work and health
The white paper sets out what the NHS will do to become a model employer in supporting and promoting the health of its 1.3 million staff. The DH will support NHS organisations to become healthier workplaces. Specific initiatives will include:

• guidance for NHS organisations on creating smoke-free buildings
• a joint campaign with the Royal College of Nursing to support nurses who want to give up smoking
• work with NHS employer organisations on implementing the Framework for Vocational Rehabilitation
• new guidelines on the management of mental illness in the workplace.

The white paper notes that ‘healthcare is about returning patients to good health, and that includes getting them back to work’, it says that health professionals, wherever they work, need to start from the point of view that getting people back to work is likely to benefit their long-term health. Return to work must be seen as the norm and, where appropriate, should be included in treatment plans from the start. To ensure that this happens, the NHS will support a wider, occupational health approach.

Making it happen – national and local delivery
The white paper sets out the next steps for delivery. Action falls into three broad areas:

• Information and evidence – it is necessary to provide the information and research evidence to achieve real-time health surveillance and support cost-effective interventions to improve health, inform commissioning of services and improve practice of front-line staff.

• Building the workforce – the changes needed to deliver the policies in the white paper rely on the right people with the right skills being in place to deliver them and on barriers to change being removed.

• Systems for local delivery – these will be achieved by aligning investment, performance assurance mechanisms, planning guidance, inspection and regulation processes to deliver increased flexibility. It will involve providing incentives for good performance and enabling strong leadership and management.

Confederation viewpoint
The public health white paper is a landmark document that promotes a genuine cross-governmental approach to public health, pushing it towards the top of priorities across the whole spectrum of government. It recognises the significant health benefits that could be gained by tackling public health issues. While
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the NHS has an important national and local responsibility for ensuring that health is on everyone’s agenda, the white paper acknowledges, importantly, that the NHS can only be a part of the programme to improve public health and cannot solve all health-related problems on its own.

Now we have the foundations in place to make a real difference; but the hard work is still to come in putting this into practice. The origins of most poor health lie deep in our society and they must be tackled through broad-based strategies based on strong and effective partnerships across our communities.

PCTs and trusts will need to develop their local partnerships to ensure that they are fully engaged in:

- the integrated planning and delivery of public health messages in schools through enhanced school nursing services, engagement in the development of extended schools and universal delivery of the National Healthy Schools standard, the use of personal health guides and accessible information for parents and carers
- changing the focus of health visiting and other child health services through Healthy Start programmes and Sure Start children’s centre activities
- building local community health capacity through health development activities and the development, through Local Strategic Partnerships, of Local Area Agreements in which public health initiatives are embedded
- recognising that better public health involves promoting the health of the full range of NHS staff through improved occupational health activities and using Improving Working Lives as a focus for enhancing staff well-being
- ensuring that pockets of deprivation are considered when practice-led and other commissioning decisions are being developed and implemented
- working as a whole local health economy to ensure that public health messages are part of the day-to-day experience of all users of health and social care services.

For further information on the issues covered in this Briefing, contact jo.webber@nhsconfed.org

Further Information

Choosing health: making healthy choices easier, the public health white paper, can be downloaded at: www.dh.gov.uk

An executive summary can be downloaded at: www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/09/47/51/04094751.pdf

NSF for children, young people and maternity services: www.dh.gov.uk/assetRoot/04/09/05/60/04090560.pdf