

Why is long term care a key political issue?

The facts are powerful. I in 4 people will need long term care in their lifetime. Over 20 million people have a relative in a care home. 80% of people in a MORI poll thought the cost of long term care should be free at the point of use. In 1997 the Prime Minister seemed to be taking notice.

"It's pretty simple the type of country I want. It's a country where our children are proud and happy to grow up in. I don't want them brought up in a country where the only way pensioners can get long term care is by selling their home." -Tony Blair's first party conference speech as Prime Minister.

Back then Tony Blair painted a picture of a fair society, where we continue to share the cost of ill health. For many patients the reality is still very different as they are forced to pay for aspects of their care themselves.

The government tried to take the sting from the issue by providing support for nursing care costs. Leaving people to pay for personal care – help with tasks such as eating, dressing and bandaging. But this approach continues to create anger, at the indignity and unfairness of placing a burden on people at such a vulnerable time in their lives.

The system of funding for long term care is complicated, but leaves both patients and relatives in no doubt that the government are retreating from the idea that society should share the burden of its cost.

Meanwhile in Scotland the Parliament decided to provide substantial state support for personal care costs. The scheme has been in place for a year and has proved successful despite initial delays in assessing cases. The Scottish approach highlights the inequity of the situation in the rest of the UK, and dents the argument that free personal care is unaffordable. Non Scottish tax payers will note the irony of them contributing towards free personal care in Scotland, whilst they have to meet their own costs.

Trends show that more of us are receiving care at home. The government is trying to

reduce the pressure on acute hospitals and patients like to avoid hospital. But as many patients are now discovering NHS funding rarely follows you home. Much of the care that is free in hospital is charged for in community settings.

"There is considerable evolution going on. Things that in the past only happened in hospital are now being delivered by home care - things like cardiac rehabilitation, intravenous antibiotics and chemotherapy." - Bill McClimont, UK Home Care Association

We will all have to take responsibility for more of our own care costs in future. The investment in intermediate care intends to relieve pressure on acute beds, and is sold as an increase in the facilities of the NHS. But it masks a clear intention to ask patients to pay for part of the service. Patients with pneumonia or getting over a hip operation could end up paying for their personal care after only 2 weeks in intermediate care.

It is too late for many older people to build-up savings, or insure against these care costs, a significant cause of resentment. But the medical cards of the younger generation are clearly marked – don't assume the state will pay.

This has its own political significance. Young people are now expected to save for long term care in addition to meeting the cost of their education, pension and housing. More people are beginning to question this growing burden.

The pressure for funding care is currently felt most, not by the middle classes, but by all those with capital worth over £19500.

Care homes bills, commonly £25,000 a year, erode capital sums quickly. The average stay is about 3 years. People with modest amounts of capital, usually from a house that they have saved for all their lives, are making a disproportionate commitment towards the cost of care. It is this sought of unfairness that prompted the NHS into being in the first place.

How do we answer the government's case?

"free personal care is too expensive"

The cost of free personal care has been estimated at about £1billion. This is around 0.1 % of current GDP. It is therefore affordable. It

ranks as a top priority with the public, in a MORI poll 80% agreed that it should be free and long term care topped a BBC poll about which NHS issues are of greatest concern.

“The government is investing in home care instead.”

Providing the health and social services to keep people independent in their own homes is essential. But many of these services are means tested and forces many people with moderate means to pay for them. Free personal care would enable everyone to have access to the care that they need regardless of their ability to pay.

“¾ of those in care homes get help with personal care costs from public funds.”

Many of these people will still pay substantial amounts towards their personal care costs. Around 100,000 people in care homes pay for all their personal care costs. Not counted are the people paying for personal care in their own homes, estimates put this figure between 50-100,000 people.

“our alternative approaches - such as intermediate care, offer better value.”

As a half way house between hospital and home intermediate care offers recovery time from illness and operations. The problem is that unlike hospital care it is not always free. Those with pneumonia or those recovering from hip operations could well be charged for care after only two weeks in an intermediate care bed.

“Free personal care would not increase the level of services”

Introducing free personal care free would bring services to whole range of people who cannot currently get them. One million people spend 50 hours a week or more caring for a friend or relative. Many of these people suffer their own health problems as a result of taking on this work. With 5 million carers nationally the health costs are considerable. Free personal care could not replace carers but would give many substantial support and a chance for respite.

“free personal care primarily helps middle class people protect their homes for inheritance”

Far from effecting only the middle class the current arrangements ask those with a modest amount of capital to commit it all to long term care costs. Currently if you have over £19000 worth of capital you will pay all of your personal

care costs. An average stay in a care homes costs £20000 a year. The commission's report concluded state that 44% had capital of £60,000 which would be completely wiped out if they required long term care. the heaviest burden is being paid by those with moderate levels of capital.

3 more good reasons for free long term care.

Share the burden of long term care

The question of charging for personal and social care boils down to principle. How does a rich nation such as the UK want to treat its older and its disabled people and those with chronic disease? Should its citizens be collectively responsible or individually liable for the risks and costs of ill-health and disability? The Wanless report concluded that healthcare free at the point of use, paid for through progressive taxation was both efficient and fair, the government accepted this view.

Divided care creates discrimination

Many people require personal care because of the affects of a medical condition eg alzheimers. Why make patients pay for care just because they have a chronic rather than acute condition or because they have had s stroke rather than a form of cancer.

The vast majority of nurses regard personal care as healthcare and part of caring for a patient. Personal care needs are provided free at the point of delivery in acute hospitals and nurses recognise that the health of patients would certainly suffer if these needs were ignored.

The quality of care is being affected

A function known as case management, essentially the monitoring of the overall health needs of a patient by a nurse, has been removed. Home care is delivered by home care assistants. Their work should be managed by qualified nurses. But often because a number of agencies are providing this care an over view of the patients needs can be lost.

For more information about the Right to Care campaign

- a coalition of bodies campaigning for free longterm care write to: Paul Evans, NHS Support Federation, Community Base, 113 Queens Road, BN1 3XG or email paul@nhscampaign.org