

LETTERS

FALLING THROUGH THE GAPS IN CARE

The health service is more intent on cure than on careJohn R Hughes *group medical director*

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Heath makes some excellent points.¹ The fundamental problem is that the NHS has not kept pace with the demographic change in society. The needs of vulnerable, usually elderly, patients and those approaching the end of their lives are being sidelined in a health service that is more intent on cure than on care. As Heath states, the gaps through which vulnerable patients sink are many, not least the health and social care divide that, despite multiple “reorganisations,” is still present in many health economies.

A return to community hospitals, as a means of closing some of these gaps, is emotionally enticing. However, beds in many of these facilities, especially smaller ones, cost more to run than equivalents in a district general hospital, and it is unclear whether younger GPs have the time or enthusiasm to manage sick inpatients in an increasingly risk averse clinical climate.

At least one of the “gaps” can be closed by much closer working arrangements between primary and secondary care. If patients are to be managed in their own community GPs and community teams will need help, support, and intervention from their district general hospital colleagues. A patient-centric, rather than a

hospital-centric, approach is needed to manage an increasingly large and vulnerable cohort of patients whose problems span medical complexity, high nursing and care needs, and often mental health issues.

GPs will find it increasingly difficult to support families to recognise that hospitals are no longer “safe havens” for their sick relatives. A “specialist” opinion is, however, worth its weight in geriatricians, if not gold.

The medical profession must close the gaps between hospital and community, primary and secondary, and mental health and non-mental cure and care.

The prize is a health and social care service which, for once, we can all be proud of.

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1 Heath I. Falling through the gaps in care. *BMJ* 2012;345:e7863. (21 November.)

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