



## LETTERS

## RESPONSE TO WINTER CRISIS

# As we continue to delay death, total system breakdown is inevitable

Nicholas McDowall *retired general practitioner*

Gloucestershire

I recently listened to a news item on BBC Radio 4 discussing the perennial NHS bed shortage<sup>1</sup> and felt relief, tinged with guilt that I was no longer part of it. I retired from a busy inner city general practice a year ago, just three months short of the chequered flag of my 65th birthday.

The radio item included interviews and opinions about funding shortfalls and reduced bed numbers over years and the need to expand community care. Naturally, they mentioned the ever increasing elderly population. I heard waffle but no convincing answers.

Medical intervention clearly begets more of the same. The commendable and desirable drive to treat or prevent illness and to improve survival and longevity leads inexorably to the need for ever more input—we are pushing a snowball uphill.

Care requirements cease only at death (if we ignore wealthy optimists who opt for cryopreservation), so every medical success in delaying it makes the next challenge more difficult. Ground breaking medical and surgical interventions result in

more intractable problems elsewhere. When we cure cancer we will be diverted to the increased prevalence of end stage dementia and other organ failures.

Improved efficiencies and anticipatory care provision make better use of funding and carers for now but won't prevent the ultimate system breakdown brought about by delaying the end of life. Perhaps meltdown has already occurred? It depends how we define it—how long the queue of waiting ambulances or the corridor strewn with trolleys.

I feel empathy for my former colleagues who are battling on.

Competing interests: None declared.

Full response at: <http://www.bmj.com/content/360/bmj.k19/rr-0>.

<sup>1</sup> Iacobucci G. NHS cancels planned surgery and outpatient appointments in response to winter crisis. *BMJ* 2018;360:k19. 10.1136/bmj.k19.29298766

Published by the BMJ Publishing Group Limited. For permission to use (where not already granted under a licence) please go to <http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions>