



FEATURE

No deal? Not a happy prospect for life after March 2019

Disruption to healthcare from a bad Brexit would risk lives, warns **Niall Dickson**, chief executive of the NHS Confederation and co-chair of the Brexit Health Alliance

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For too long the government wasn't prepared to consider the prospect of a "no deal" exit from the European Union. And it adhered to an unfortunate fiction that the implications could be managed relatively easily if it did happen.

The government may have had good tactical reasons for such a negotiating stance, but reality has now dawned: whatever your views on the UK's departure from the EU, crashing out is bad news on a wide range of fronts—not least the welfare of patients in the UK and, indeed, throughout Europe.

Rising anxiety

This is real, not scaremongering. And, if we get it wrong, lives could be at risk. It's fair to say that anxiety levels at the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC) have risen of late. Our impression at the Brexit Health Alliance is that the DHSC is one of the better prepared departments in Whitehall, having always had a degree of realism in its official ranks.

But, as the detailed implications of what a no deal scenario might entail become apparent, there's an understandable and justified push to fortify preparations. The prospect of medicines and other lifesaving supplies being held up at European ports for days, or even weeks, is not fanciful. Nor is the warning that the M20 motorway could become a giant lorry park, dwarfing the scale of previous versions of Operation Stack, the contingency plan used for previous issues with the Channel ports.

This, then, is about protecting lives—making sure that patients have access to the medicines and other treatments they need. As of 29 March 2019 they will continue to turn up at GP surgeries, outpatient clinics, and emergency departments. They will expect operations to go ahead and for community nurses to have the materials they need to deliver high quality care.

We all take for granted the supply chains that make modern healthcare work. More than ever before, those chains are complex and interdependent, and much of healthcare operates on a just-in-time basis, making it susceptible to disruption, with potentially serious consequences when that happens.

Preparing appropriately

Understanding all of this—and accepting it—is a first step. The challenge then is how to prepare appropriately with detailed operational guidance for every stage in the supply chain, including those endpoints where care is delivered. Of course, a balance must be struck: it's in no one's interest to encourage a rush to unplanned stockpiling or, indeed, anything that makes matters worse or causes unnecessary anxiety.

The DHSC is working with the pharmaceutical and devices industries as part of a contingency planning programme, which should provide some assurance. The NHS has a great record in responding to emergencies. It is in many ways the service at its best, bringing managers and clinicians together in a common cause and demonstrating the huge value in careful planning. The service will surely rise to this challenge as it has to previous ones.

But we should be under no illusion: all signs are that the scale of what will be required in a no deal scenario is very considerable. As it is, at the Brexit Health Alliance we've suggested that every NHS board should assess the risks and at the very least undertake an inventory to identify vulnerabilities in the supply chain. It will be important to understand where gaps may occur and how to plug them.

It would be an unusual, and in some respects unprecedented, situation: unlike the familiar EPRR (emergency preparedness, resilience, and response) planning for local resilience, the impact of a no deal outcome extends across the country and could persist for an unspecified time.

Last month Chris Wormald, permanent secretary at the DHSC, told the House of Commons' Exiting the European Union Committee that he could not be confident that essential medicines would be available in a no deal Brexit, describing the challenge as "extremely difficult."

When the mandarins look rattled we need to take it seriously.