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Cite this as: *BMJ* 2021;374:n2393
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1136/bmj.n2393>

Published: 30 September 2021

Thinking time, the scarce rocket fuel of health services

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The psychologist Edward de Bono, who died earlier this year, popularised lateral thinking (doi:10.1136/bmj.n1831).¹ An IBM researcher told de Bono that his book *Six Thinking Hats* reduced meeting times to a quarter of what they had been. Creative thinking, argued de Bono, “is a skill that can be practised and nurtured.” That may be so, but thinking through innovative solutions and strategies requires time—and time is a commodity currently in short supply.

Without time to think, it's hard to see our way out of the backlogs in cancer services that will take a decade to clear (doi:10.1136/bmj.n2352)²; or an end to overprescribing that results in 10% of prescriptions being inappropriate (doi:10.1136/bmj.n2338)³; or understand the benefits and harms to women of hormone therapies (doi:10.1136/bmj.n2182; <https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/09/29/menopausal-hormone-therapy-and-dementia>).^{4 5} We struggle to introduce mechanisms for universities to restrict research funding from industries that harm health (doi:10.1136/bmj.n1657)⁶; or a way to tackle the inequalities that mean that the fastest rise in waiting lists is in the most deprived areas (doi:10.1136/bmj.n2373)⁷; or to limit “political meddling” in decisions on whether to close services (doi:10.1136/bmj.n2336).⁸

“Creative” solutions might not be welcomed by staff facing workforce shortages, fewer beds, and increasing demand. The problem for both primary and secondary care is workload and finding time to think through and implement the innovations they are capable of delivering, such as in diabetes care (doi:10.1136/bmj.n1927).⁹ With media and politicians attacking health professions, when they need support, it's important to remember that doctors in primary care and acute medicine are both trying “to do the right thing” in their own contexts (doi:10.1136/bmj.n2358).¹⁰ It's a time for unity, not division.

If lateral thinking is hard, doing the right thing can be equally difficult. The obscene inequity that leads to only 2% of people being vaccinated against covid-19 in poor countries isn't helped by plans for booster doses in rich countries. First, fears of waning immunity are overstated (doi:10.1136/bmj.n2320).¹¹ Second, promises made at the recent UN general assembly, to vaccinate 70% of people in all countries within a year, are unrealistic and will be made undeliverable by plans to deliver booster doses (doi:10.1136/bmj.n2353).¹² The answer still lies in intellectual property waivers, technology transfer, and support to create regional manufacturing hubs, says Suerie Moon and colleagues, as they explain how to prepare for the next pandemic (doi:10.1136/bmj.n2256).¹³

Thought and action on race are usually mismatched too. Reasons for higher rates of GMC referral among ethnic minority doctors and failures to progress to senior positions might be exhaustively explored, says Partha Kar, but there is a simple explanation: racism (doi:10.1136/bmj.n2340).¹⁴ Racism, via differential police harassment of ethnic minorities, is also the outcome of UK drugs policy (doi:10.1136/bmj.n2147).¹⁵ The answer, believes Simon Woolley, is an open discussion with decriminalisation as a serious option—as is being considered in Scotland for class A drug users (doi:10.1136/bmj.n2362).¹⁶

Lateral thinking and creative solutions are certainly in evidence among the winners of The BMJ Awards 2021 (<https://thebmjawards.bmj.com>; doi:10.1136/bmj.n2326; doi:10.1136/bmj.n2327; doi:10.1136/bmj.n2350).¹⁷⁻¹⁹ It's clear that empowered clinical teams in primary care, acute medicine, and long term care have the passion and knowhow to deliver a better service for patients as well as saving money. Thinking time is a luxury in our overstretched world, but it is the rocket fuel that health services most urgently need.

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