Working towards a sustainable healthcare system and a million acts of kindness

Richard Smith chair

For many people their skills and their time are their most valuable assets. That’s why experts can charge hundreds of pounds for an hour’s consultation. This can preclude access to that skill or expertise to all but an exclusive few. Time banking is a system that takes money off the table by allowing you to give an hour of your time to someone in exchange for a time credit. You can then use this credit to request somebody else’s experience or expertise. When you are yourself helped, you pay that debt forward to benefit someone else, thereby initiating a virtuous circle. Hexitime (https://hexitime.com/) is the first timebank in the world whose purpose is to improve healthcare.

Initiated with a grant from the Health Foundation, Hexitime runs campaigns on important healthcare issues—such as reducing the length of stays in hospitals or encouraging inclusivity for healthcare staff from ethnic minority groups. To achieve these, healthcare staff exchange skills to achieve the campaign aim and thereby their small actions make a big difference. Now it is running one on taking practical action to support the green agenda in the NHS, with particular emphasis on greener surgery, biodiversity, waste management, and sustainable food and nutrition.1

The NHS in England is committed to getting to carbon net zero by 2040 with all that it controls directly and by 2045 with all it purchases from around the world; the NHSs in Scotland, Wales, and Ireland have similar commitments. Achieving net zero will require huge, unprecedented change and a great deal of research and innovation—because nobody knows exactly how to achieve a net zero health system.

The system will have to change and so will all the people within it, so sharing skills and time will be essential. Hexitime can help. Some people have lots of knowledge and experience of reducing carbon consumption within healthcare, while others have thought little about the challenge. Sharing of time, skills, and ideas will be essential for success.

All you need to sign up to Hexitime is to have an email address, be over 18, and commit to helping and being helped with no money changing hands. You can make an offer to support the green agenda (perhaps to share how you reduced waste or encouraged staff to walk or cycle to work), or you can ask for help to develop your innovation or idea. You can also post a challenge or question and thereby encourage others to contribute. This thinking together can produce new ideas and solutions. You can also score and comment on the ideas posted, helping the best rise to the top.

Hexitime is a community interest company, meaning that all profits are invested in developing the work. The green campaign is sponsored by Kent Surrey and Sussex Academic Health Science Network, which exists to spread healthcare innovation at pace and scale. KSS AHSN is part of a national network of 15 AHSNs covering the whole of England and anybody from any part of the country can join the timebank—as, indeed, can people from outside the UK.

Donating time to others to improve their competencies, innovate, and develop is an act of kindness, and every hour you exchange contributes to a global target of a million acts of kindness. As I write (24 March), community members on Hexitime have contributed 685 hours to a global target that stands at 142,095 acts of kindness. Why not add your act of kindness and help achieve a sustainable NHS?

Competing interests: Richard Smith chairs the UK Health Alliance on Climate Change and is a trustee of the Point of Care Foundation. Hesham Abdalla, a co-founder of Hexitime, also sits as one of the trustees and is head of quality improvement at Oxford University Hospitals NHS Trust.

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