



London general: 70 years of improving life in the Capital

NHS general practice is celebrating its 70th birthday, which is a major milestone in the history of British medicine. The availability of general practice to Londoners (8m of us in 1948, 9m now, but as few as 6.5m in the 1990s) has been the bedrock of the NHS since its founding, providing cradle-to-grave care to all families, including those in the most deprived communities.

With 90% of NHS contacts taking place in general practice, GPs and practice teams are the face of the NHS throughout the Capital. Recently the Government announced a £20bn investment in the NHS, but from past experience little of this will reach the frontline of general practice. It is likely to be, as with much of our history, the hard work and dedication of the whole team working inside each GP surgery that delivers the next 70 years' of success. So, on this significant birthday I would like to reflect on what general practice has achieved.

Universal coverage

Thanks to the development of NHS general practice, more and more people are now in regular contact with their GP:

9,655,530 patients are registered in London;

each month 23 million people in the UK visit their surgery to see a GP or nurse;

59m people in the UK are registered with a GP up 2.3 million since 2013;

91% of patients trust their doctor, with doctors and nurses being the two most trusted professions in the UK; and

84% of patients are very satisfied with their GP.

Eradicating disease

Before the NHS many people were dying from preventable ailments such as diphtheria or tetanus. Today the children have access to universal vaccination programmes, delivered by general practice:

125,000 children are born in London each year, all have access to vaccinations from their GP;

measles vaccine coverage exceeds 95% of children under five in the UK;

polio was officially eradicated in the UK in 1988, following three decades of vaccination work; and

GPs have been providing the HPV vaccination for over 10 years, reducing new infections by 90%.

Longer lives

Average lifespans have grown substantially since 1948, with the work of general practice meaning far more people are living decades beyond retirement age:

prior to 1948, the average life span for men was 66 years and for women 70 years;

the average life span for men has increased to 79 years, and 83 years for women;

in 1951, 65-74 year-olds made up 67% of the pension age population with over 85s representing just 4%;

today 65-74 year olds represent 51% of pensioners and over-85s now represent 14%;

NHS general practice now cares for 11 million people over the age of 65; and

general practice is still fighting to close the lifespan gap between rich and poor, with people in Kensington and Chelsea still living on average four years longer than those in Tower Hamlets.

A diverse workforce

Over the past 70 years, the NHS has transformed into being among the most diverse workforces in the world, currently a quarter of NHS staff working in London are from outside the UK and general practice draws its talent from across the globe:

44,422 GPs working in the UK qualified here;

764 qualified in the Europe Economic Area;

3,434 GPs qualified elsewhere in the world; and

48% of registered GPs are men and 52% women.

The enduring role of the family doctor

These achievements are impressive and a testament to the way general practice has developed with the NHS, but the values of general practice have rightly remained the same. A report from 1948, titled *Public Health in 1948: Remarkable Statistics: the first months of the National Health Service* paints a picture that GPs and practice teams would recognise today, although now we do have equal numbers of “his” and “hers”:

“The success of the family doctor service depends primarily on the family doctor's relationship with his patients and that is not changed merely by an alteration in the method of payment for service. The administration required is far less than in the other branches. The service has been extremely popular with the public and it seems that despite the size of the undertaking and despite the uneven distribution of load which follows from the present distribution of doctors, the family doctors carried it successfully through its first year.”

The clinical team is made up of GPs, nurses, advanced practitioners, healthcare assistants and numerous new roles delivers so much more than the sum of its parts. Triaging, advice on self-care, diabetes management and many other tasks have been passed from GPs to skilled colleagues. The support they received from practice managers, administrators and reception staff enables the clinical team to take on these wider roles and helps to relieve much of the bureaucratic load which the powers-that-be choose to impose.