

Health Matters

A monthly overview of news and developments within the health sector in Northern Ireland.

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Welcome to the first edition of Health Matters.

The concept behind this e-bulletin is to provide a monthly overview of news and developments within the health sector in Northern Ireland.

We will bring you the issues that have been addressed in government and the stories that have hit the headlines, in bite size portions. Each month we will

also give you an insight into someone that has a key role within the sector.

In this edition, we have included a feature on the Chief Operating Officer of Action Cancer – Norman Carson. He provides us with a glimpse into his career to date and his new role within one of the most widely recognised cancer charities here.

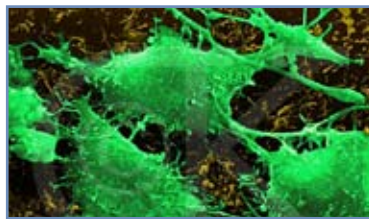
Asitis also hold a number of in-house events throughout the year and so in our diary focus, we will keep you informed of any past and future activities, on topics that matter to you.

News Review

Dementia hit the headlines this month following reports that the condition costs the UK £23 billion each year - more than cancer and heart disease combined.

Despite this cost to society, the Alzheimer's Research Trust has stated that there are stark differences in funding between these three conditions; for every pound spent on dementia studies, £12 is spent on investigating cancer and £3 on heart disease.

According to a report published by Oxford University, each dementia patient costs the economy



£27,647 each year, nearly five times more than a cancer patient and eight times more than someone suffering from heart disease. The expense is driven mainly by the extent of unpaid carers and long-term institutional care.

Cancer was in the news again, following an announcement that a new gene discovery could lead to more personalised treatment for breast cancer patients. The scientists from Queen's

University found that high levels of FKBPL in breast cancer cells suggest a woman will respond well to the commonly used drug Tamoxifen and have a better chance of survival than women with low levels of the gene.

The European Heart Journal has published a report stating that happy people are less likely to develop heart disease. The study is the first to show an independent relationship between positive emotions and coronary heart disease and implies that it may be possible to help prevent heart disease by boosting people's positive emotions.

News Review (continued)

In mid-February, chief medical officer, Michael McBride defended comments he made that swine flu had the potential to be one of the biggest health threats the public would face and insisted the pandemic is not over. His remarks came following news that out of the 751,200 vaccinations purchased by the Department of Health, more than 420,000 vaccines have not been administered raising questions as to whether this pandemic had been over-hyped.

It has been reported that Downe Hospital, which opened last year at a

cost of £64m may be forced to reduce beds and cut services at its Accident and Emergency department in a bid to save funds. The South Eastern Health Trust is currently considering the move. Pressure has been caused by a shortage of middle grade doctors to cover night time shifts and budget restraints.

A shortage of junior doctors has also been stressed by the British Medical Association who has stated that this may result in patients waiting longer and travelling further for treatments.



The Minister for Health stated this month that young drug addicts here need a drop-in centre facility to provide advice and support. This followed news that more than one fifth of youths aged 11-16 have used illegal drugs or solvents.

Diary Focus

Asitis Breakfast Forum with the RQIA

Glenn Houston, the Chief Executive of Northern Ireland's health regulatory body the RQIA, joined the Asitis team and leaders from across the health sector for our latest breakfast seminar.



Glenn began his career almost 30 years ago in what was a largely unregulated landscape. He has risen, alongside the introduction and changes in regulations that would eventually lead him to take top post in the new body set-up to oversee standards in health and social care across the statutory, voluntary and private sectors.

The RQIA's remit extends across Health and Social Services; from

ensuring the quality of hospital services, to standards in care homes and social care environments. With powers of enforcement and a regulatory role the RQIA's work impacts almost every area of the sector. In addition, the body recently took charge of a range of responsibilities for people with mental illness and learning disabilities and completed a review of the department's response to the c. difficile outbreak.

As part of the lively question and answers session, Glenn also addressed questions regarding the introduction of regulation to private dental practice, x-ray and radiography and the possible introduction of a star rating for care services.

He also commented on the current challenges faced in delivering fair and manageable regulation, adding that the issues we struggle with in Northern Ireland and across the UK are the same issues faced by regulators across Europe.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Breakfast Forum:

Jim Wells MLA

Jim Wells MLA, Chair of the Assembly Health Committee has agreed to be speaker at our next breakfast forum scheduled for 1st April.. He will be giving his assessment of the current priorities for the committee. This event will begin at 8.30am and will be held at Asitis offices, 17A Ormeau Avenue. This event is free and will be finished by 10am.

Face2Face Seminar: Policing and Justice

On 25th March, we will be holding a Face2Face seminar which will explore the impact of the devolution of policing and justice. Our expert panel will explore the challenges and pitfalls for the new Justice Minister. The seminar will also examine what reform measures might be taken in areas such as legal aid, discuss the future for the Policing Board and assess the overall impact on those that have a stake within the new legal and judicial landscape.

If you are interested in any of our upcoming events please register interest by phone or email.



Health on the Hill

ASSEMBLY

The Health Minister Michael McGimpsey made a statement to the Assembly on the latest North South Ministerial Council. The statement covered a wide range of health issues discussed in the meeting on 25 November 2009. The Council discussed plans to set up an all-Ireland gene library and a bio-bank for medical research. They also reviewed the establishment of a joint protocol covering children in care and those on the child protection register who go missing. The Minister said members had been updated on developments on vetting arrangements, and work was under way to put those on a statutory basis in Ireland.

Child protection was also the focus of a new 'Green Cross Code' for internet safety launched by the Minister at the beginning of the month to help encourage parents to talk to their children about internet safety.

The Minister also visited the new £9million adolescent mental health facility at the Forster Green site in Belfast. The facility, which began taking in patients earlier this month, provides inpatient mental health services for young people.

Sinn Féin brought a debate to the assembly on peri-natal psychiatric services. Moving the motion, Michelle O'Neill criticized the absence of peri-natal psychiatric services despite suicide being the greatest indirect killer of new mothers. The motion was supported by members of the SDLP and DUP, with objections from the UUP. In response, Health Minister Michael McGimpsey said he could not provide funding for the specialist mental health service for new mothers requested by the motion. He emphasised that budget cuts had jeopardised money allocated to some mental services, but that he would create an action plan for peri-natal services in the event that money became available in the future.

Discussion in the Health Committee focused on the departmental response to the 'General Report on the Health and Social Care Sector in Northern Ireland'. Evidence was given from departmental staff

Sean Donaghy, Dr Miriam McCarthy and Diane Taylor included information on the greatly increased cost of GP out-of-hours services. Sean Donaghy told the committee that the increase was due to the General Medical Services (GMS) contract, which was renegotiated in 2003.

The committee also called for a review of Northern Ireland's response to the swine flu pandemic and a breakdown of the £61m used to tackle it. Members praised the Department of Health's medical response, but questioned if more than £30m would be poured down the drain with an unused stockpile of vaccines.

Earlier in the month the committee discussed the inquiry on obesity and was briefed by Departmental officials. Discussions regarding the Public Health Agency including a briefing from the chief executive, Dr Eddie Rooney outlined the initiatives under way to deal with health inequalities and smoking prioritised. The PHA's Carolyn Harper also announced that a bowel screening programme was planned to begin in April 2010.

Concern was raised about the lack of information on revised spending plans coming from the minister. During budget statements Finance Minister Sammy Wilson announced budget cuts of £376m in early January. Committee Chair Jim Wells noted other departments had already posted their revised spending plans on their websites, but the Department of Health had said it was unlikely to be in a position to do this until late March.

REGULATORY

The Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority (RQIA) published its report on Blood Safety - a review of the implementation of the National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) 'Right Patient Right Blood' safety notice. The report, commissioned by the Minister for HSSPS, made 22 recommendations for the Trusts and 17 for Independent Healthcare Providers; the majority relating to training/assessment recording and harmonising policies.

A new strategy to reduce and control the spread of healthcare associated infections has been launched by the Department of Health. The report updates the previous 2006 strategy, complements the Trusts existing action plans and takes account of the recommendations made by the RQIA's review of the C.difficile outbreak.

DEPARTMENTAL

Following the recent High Court decision, the Department of Health Social Services and Public Safety has withdrawn its 'Guidance on the Termination of Pregnancy'. The High Court ruled that the part of guidance relating to advice to health professionals on matters of counselling and conscientious objection was misleading.

The Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety published a statistical bulletin summarising information on adults receiving domiciliary care during a survey week in September 2009. The main findings indicate that during the survey week an estimated 235,559 contact hours of domiciliary care were provided by HSC Trusts for 23,377 clients in Northern Ireland. Almost three in 10 (6,630) of these clients were receiving an intensive domiciliary care service.

CONSULTATION

A public consultation exercise on the labelling of alcohol, launched by the Department of Health in London, has been extended to Northern Ireland. The consultation addresses how best to take forward action to better inform consumers about the number of units in alcoholic drinks, recommended alcohol intake, and guidance on alcohol and pregnancy.

Asitis Consulting can provide an in-depth weekly monitoring service for clients. Phone or email for further details

Profile

Profile Norman Carson – Action Cancer Chief Operating Officer

When Norman Carson retired from a long and successful career in the Health Service, he soon discovered that he did not enjoy putting his feet up.

“I’m just not one of those people who likes to sit around,” he said. “I am a very active person and always want to have something to get my teeth into.”

Norman, from Lisbane, Co Down spent the first few months of retirement renovating a relative’s bathroom.

Once that was complete he threw himself into voluntary work and was invited to serve on the board of Action Cancer, where he was elected Treasurer and appointed Chair of the board’s audit committee. There he was able to use his knowledge of good corporate governance to help improve processes, procedures and protocols for the charity.

In January he was appointed Chief Operating Officer of the charity – a new challenge which he is thoroughly enjoying.

Norman joined the civil service in 1964, became an auditor with the then Ministry of Health before switching to the Health Service in 1977. In 1995 he was appointed director of finance with the South and East Belfast Trust, a post he held until his retirement in 2007.

He is a former Irish president of the Chartered Association of Certified Accountants.

Leading a Voluntary Organisation represents something of a culture shock for Norman.

He said: “One thing you immediately notice is the sheer size and scale of the Third Sector in Northern Ireland – I hadn’t realised just

how big it is.”

Norman says that the difference in funding regimes also has an enormous impact on both culture and focus. “In the Health Service, your funding is reasonably secure, and the money flows on the basis of service agreements.”

“The fact that we do not have much government funding leads to a very different focus. We have to work very hard at demonstrating the value that we bring – and I find myself out and about a lot.”

This means that for Norman there is now a great awareness of the number of stakeholders that Action Cancer serves.

“Just one example of this is that it is really important that members of our new Assembly understand what we do and the value that we bring.”

Norman believes that there is enormous potential for voluntary organisations to increase and improve service provision in conjunction with the Health Service.

“..it is really important that members of our new Assembly understand what we do and the value that we bring.”

He said: “There is a gap in the market for what we do and as a charity we are able to respond more flexibly and responsively to needs than the public sector can. We represent great value for money in that we have low overheads, are very flexible and responsive to new demands and are totally accountable for what we can achieve.”

“In the case of Action Cancer we provide an extremely important service on the screening side – our Big-bus brings screening to people who perhaps might not otherwise seek out the service and our work saves the NHS money.”

In the months ahead Norman and his colleagues will be carrying that message both to politicians and his old colleagues in the Health Service as they promote the importance of their work.

It’s a big challenge, but one which Norman clearly relishes.

