

British Geriatrics Society
Improving healthcare for older people

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Russell George MS
Chair, Health and Social Care Committee
Senedd Cymru
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Dear Mr George,

Supporting people with chronic conditions – response from the British Geriatrics Society

The British Geriatrics Society (BGS) welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this important consultation about supporting people with chronic conditions. The BGS is the membership organisation for all healthcare professionals engaged in the treatment and care of older people across the UK. Since 1947 our members have been at the forefront of transforming the quality of care available to older people. Our vision is for a society where all older people receive high-quality patient-centred care where and when they need it. We currently have over 4,600 members across the UK, including around 200 in Wales. This submission has been developed by members of the BGS Wales Council which is comprised of healthcare professionals working with older people across Wales. We have structured our response around the broad areas set out in the consultation document.

NHS and social care services

- *The readiness of local NHS and social care services to treat people with chronic conditions within the community.*

Many NHS services are focused around the acute hospital, which is not where most people with chronic conditions are or need to be. There is a need to move more services into the community to be provided to people in the place they call home or near to it. While there have been moves in recent

years to provide more services closer to home through community resource teams, Hospital at Home and virtual wards services, there is a well-documented need for further investment in this type of care.¹ Many areas, however, do not have the workforce required to provide these services in the community. The NHS and social care workforce are already stretched beyond capacity and without addressing this, it will be impossible for the NHS and social care to provide good-quality care in the community to people living with chronic conditions. The services need to acknowledge care giver burden. Care giver burden is the perception of strain and stress resulting from perceived obligation to provide care to loved ones. Careful consideration needs to be given to support given to families while providing care and support near to their homes.

- *Access to essential services and ongoing treatment, and any barriers faced by certain groups, including women, people from ethnic minority backgrounds and disabled people.*

While chronic conditions can affect people of any age, it must be acknowledged that the vast majority of people with chronic conditions are older people – 58% of people over 60 are affected by a chronic condition compared to only 14% of those under 40.² It is therefore essential that access to services for people with chronic conditions is set up with older people in mind. Many older people have limited mobility and therefore may struggle to travel to appointments. In addition, many older people have more than one chronic condition and will struggle to travel to multiple appointments for each condition.

It is also important to note that around 20% of pensioners in Wales live in relative income poverty.³ People living in poverty are also more likely to have chronic conditions with a 60% higher prevalence of chronic conditions in the poorest social class when compared to the richest social class.² Those living in poverty are likely to experience more challenges in accessing care for their conditions.

While IT solutions such as virtual appointments for clinical review and assessments may be an option for some people, older people with chronic conditions may not have the equipment or knowledge to access services in this way. While digital literacy among older people is increasing, this group is still one of the most likely groups to be digitally excluded. It is important that digital solutions are not relied upon and that older people who do not have access to digital technology are still able to access the care that they need, in a format that is appropriate to them.

Multiple conditions

- *The ability of NHS and social care providers to respond to individuals with multimorbidity rather than focusing on single conditions in isolation.*

The NHS has been set up to treat people on a condition-by-condition basis and, in most cases, still operates in this way. This particularly applies to hospital care which is arranged on a specialty basis. This is not conducive to providing high-quality, patient-centred care as it can mean that patients are required to attend multiple appointments and repeat themselves constantly to different healthcare professionals. Comprehensive geriatric assessment (CGA) should be available to older people with chronic conditions to ensure that their treatment is appropriate to them. CGA is a multidimensional approach which includes physical, cognitive, functional, social and psychological components and is the gold-standard of assessment for older people. Systems should have the capacity to deliver CGA to all older patients.⁴

In addition, there needs to be a recognition across the NHS in Wales that most healthcare professionals (with the exceptions of those working in child and maternal health) will be caring for older people more than any other patient group. For this reason, healthcare professionals across all specialties and disciplines should know how to care for people with frailty, cognitive impairments and other conditions associated with ageing, alongside their own area of expertise.

- *The interaction between mental health conditions and long-term physical health conditions.*

People with chronic or long-term conditions are more likely to experience serious mental health problems, and vice versa. More than a quarter of those with one or more long-term physical health condition will also have a mental health condition and of those with symptoms of serious mental health problems, 37.6% also have long-term physical conditions.⁵ As the BGS highlighted in our submission to this Committee's inquiry into mental health inequalities,⁶ mental health services for older people in Wales are currently in crisis. Services are not currently available to guarantee people who have mental health conditions alongside long-term physical conditions are able to access the care and support they need to manage both their mental and physical health adequately.

Prevention and lifestyle

- *Action to improve prevention and early intervention (to stop people's health and wellbeing deteriorating).*

It is important to recognise that prevention and early intervention are important at all stages of the life course, not just in younger age groups. Prevention is a cornerstone of geriatric medicine with experts in older people's healthcare continuously working to prevent their older patients from becoming ill, being admitted to hospital or returning to hospital once they have been discharged. There is also good evidence that interventions through 'anticipatory' or 'proactive' care can be beneficial for many older people. These services work to identify people at risk of developing frailty or people with mild frailty

who are at risk of deteriorating and provide proactive care to prevent or reverse the onset of frailty. This enables people to live independently for longer.

- *Effectiveness of current measures to tackle lifestyle/behavioural factors (obesity, smoking etc); and to address inequalities and barriers faced by certain groups.*

While it is never too late for older people to make positive changes to their lifestyles, they may face challenges to doing so. For example, older people who drink alcohol at a harmful level may experience difficulty in accessing the services that they need and may not be identified as drinking too much. This issue exists both with NHS staff failing to assess for alcohol problems when – for instance – an older person attends an emergency department after a fall, and with family members who may excuse excess alcohol consumption as a comfort later in life.⁷

Physical activity is incredibly important for older people as it helps to reduce incidence of frailty, prevent falls and prevent other illness. People who are physically active are also more likely to recover quickly from periods of ill health and have improved mental health and cognition. However, many older people are not regularly physically active and are not sufficiently supported to be physically active. It is important that older people are able to access physical activity that is appropriate to them and are supported to be active as often as they are able.⁷

While there is understandably a focus on a prevention of obesity across the population, it is important to note that many older people face a loss of appetite as they age and may lose more weight than is healthy. Older people must be supported to continue to shop for nutritious food and to eat well as they approach later life.⁷

Impact of additional factors

- *The impact of the rising cost of living on people with chronic conditions in terms of their health and wellbeing.*

BGS members report that the cost of living crisis is having an impact on many older people, particularly during the last winter. As described above, many older people in Wales are living in poverty and this will have worsened over the last year as many people across the country have experienced extreme financial hardship. BGS members report older people failing to attend appointments as they are unable to afford the bus fare to travel there, limiting the number of meals they eat every day and heating only one room in their home.⁸ The cost of travelling to appointments is of particular concern for those with multiple chronic conditions as they may be required to attend numerous appointments with the cost of travel becoming prohibitive for some.

- *The extent to which services will have the capacity to meet future demand with an ageing population.*

Current services do not have the capacity to meet the demand that is already being created by the ageing population. The number of people in Wales aged 65 and older is projected to increase by 16.1% between mid-2020 and mid-2030 with the over 75 population projected to increase by 23.9% in the same period.⁹ One in three people aged over 85 require support with one or more activities of daily living.¹⁰ Currently there are not enough people working in the NHS and social care to provide care for this growing population group. In order to provide high-quality care to all older people who need it, the older people's healthcare workforce will need to be increased significantly. As the Welsh Government considers how the NHS and social care services are staffed in the future, the needs of older people should be kept central to their thinking. Older people are the biggest user group of health and care services and if services work well for older people, they are more likely to work well for other groups. The BGS welcomes the Welsh Government's publication of *Six goals for urgent and emergency care*¹¹ and would like to emphasise the need to support people with right care at right place when they are acutely unwell and investment in the establishment of adequate Frailty services across the NHS in Wales.

Thank you for the opportunity to contribute to this important inquiry. If you wish to discuss any aspect of our submission or to invite a member of our Wales Council to give oral evidence to the committee, please contact our Policy Manager, Sally Greenbrook (s.greenbrook@bgs.org.uk) to make arrangements.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Sam Abraham
Chair, BGS Wales Council.

¹ Royal College of Physicians Cymru, 2022. *No place like home*. Available at: <https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/news/rcp-cymru-wales-calls-investment-hospital-home-services-and-social-care-keep-patients-home> (accessed 16 May 2023)

² The King's Fund, undated. *Long-term conditions and multimorbidity*. Available at: <https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/projects/time-think-differently/trends-disease-and-disability-long-term-conditions-multi-morbidity> (accessed 16 May 2023)

³ Welsh Government, 2021. *Age friendly Wales: Our strategy for an ageing society*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/age-friendly-wales-our-strategy-ageing-society-html#80691> (accessed 16 May 2023)

⁴ British Geriatrics Society, 2023. *Joining the dots: A blueprint for preventing and managing frailty in older people (chapter two)*. Available at: <https://www.bgs.org.uk/Blueprint> (accessed 16 May 2023)

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- ⁵ Mental Health Foundation, 2023. *Physical health conditions: Statistics*. Available at: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/explore-mental-health/mental-health-statistics/physical-health-conditions-statistics#:~:text=More%20than%2015%20million%20people,also%20have%20mental%20health%20problems.&text=People%20with%20long%2Dterm%20physical,being%20scores%20than%20those%20without>. (accessed 22 May 2023)
- ⁶ British Geriatrics Society, 2022. *Mental health inequalities – Submission from the British Geriatrics Society to the Senedd Health and Social Care Committee inquiry*. Available at: <https://business.senedd.wales/documents/s123798/MHI%2046%20-%20British%20Geriatrics%20Society.pdf> (accessed 16 May 2023)
- ⁷ British Geriatrics Society, 2019. *Healthier for longer: How healthcare professionals can support older people*. Available at: <https://www.bgs.org.uk/resources/healthier-for-longer-how-healthcare-professionals-can-support-older-people> (accessed 22 May 2023)
- ¹¹ Six goals for urgent and emergency care: policy handbook for 2021 to 2026. Available at <https://www.gov.wales/six-goals-urgent-and-emergency-care-policy-handbook-2021-2026>
- ⁸ Hay, C, 2023. *BGS Blog: The Price of Poverty: The dire impact of the cost of living crisis in older adults*. Available at: <https://www.bgs.org.uk/blog/the-price-of-poverty-the-dire-impact-of-the-cost-of-living-crisis-in-older-adults> (accessed 22 May 2023)
- ⁹ Welsh Government, 2022. *National population projections (interim data): 2020-based*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/national-population-projections-interim-data-2020-based#:~:text=Wales%20population%20projections%20by%20age&text=The%20number%20of%20people%20aged,%2D2020%20and%20mid%2D2030>. (accessed 22 May 2023)
- ¹⁰ Age UK, 2019. *Briefing: Health and Care of Older People in England 2019*. Available at: https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/reports-and-briefings/health--wellbeing/age_uk_briefing_state_of_health_and_care_of_older_people_july2019.pdf (accessed 22 May 2023)
- ¹¹ Welsh Government, 2023. *Six goals for urgent and emergency care*. Available at: <https://www.gov.wales/six-goals-urgent-and-emergency-care-policy-handbook-2021-2026> (accessed 25 May 2023)