

The Rt Hon. the Lord Darzi of Denham OM KBE

House of Lords

London

SW1A 0PW

18 July 2024

Dear Lord Darzi,

We are pleased to note that the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care has asked you to review the 'broken' NHS. We are writing from the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh (RCPE), Royal College of Physicians (RCP) and the British Geriatrics Society (BGS), representing thousands of healthcare professionals across the UK, to offer our support for your work and ask you to consider placing a focus on the care of older people.

Firstly, a plan to 'fix' healthcare cannot be developed in isolation from improvements to the wider care system. The NHS and social care systems are implicitly and inextricably linked. The current classification of care into these two broad categories is anachronistic, increasingly arbitrary, and given the different payment models for service users, potentially discriminatory. Social care funding remains difficult to navigate and is often inequitable. Social care providers find themselves limited by inability to recruit staff because pay is set at levels which are uncompetitive when considered alongside the NHS, and opportunities for career progression within the social care sector are limited.

The combined effect of these challenges means that social care provision is limited in many parts of the country. This can lead to ill-health in older people and an increase in hospital admissions, as well as significant delays in transfers of care to their home. Around 10% of acute hospital bed days are taken up by people who are ready for discharge but have no community care package to support them safely at home, and in December 2022, more than 13,000 beds – out of a total of around 100,000 hospital beds in England – were occupied by patients who were medically fit for discharge, an increase of 57% since December 2020. [The Health Foundation has said that this rate of growth is unprecedented.](#)

We welcome the Secretary of State's announcement that he is considering a Royal Commission to look at the future of social care. We believe that your review also gives you the opportunity to talk about the urgent need for a solution to the social care crisis. Ensuring the sustainability of the NHS will depend on long term solutions to the way social care is funded and staffed.

Secondly, we want to highlight the opportunity for an evidence-based approach to the care of older people with frailty. This could transform service delivery across our NHS. Frailty affects around 10% of those aged over 65, and up to half those aged over 85. It is estimated to cost UK health and care systems £5.8 billion a year. A growing body of evidence suggests that front door frailty services, orthogeriatric services, services for pre- and peri-operative care for older people undergoing surgery, hospital at home, urgent community response and effective rehabilitation for older people recovering from illness can improve outcomes, taking pressure off the NHS, improving care for all and reducing costs in the long term. Anybody, of any age, who finds themselves queuing for emergency or elective care stands to benefit if we can enable older people with frailty to access care as soon as they need it, wherever they need it within the

system. These principles were outlined in [Joining the dots: a blueprint for preventing and managing frailty for older people](#) (BGS, 2023). We would be happy to discuss this further.

Thirdly, it will not be possible to fix a broken NHS without training a specialist medical workforce to provide effective care for older people with frailty. The BGS has outlined specific targets in [The case for more geriatricians: strengthening the workforce to care for an older population](#) (BGS, 2023).

But the work cannot stop here. We need to recruit enough nurses and therapists specialising in care of older people to deliver effective evidence-based multidisciplinary approaches to care in people's homes, in the community, and in hospitals. The NHS must urgently collate intelligence on the size of the shortfall for these professions and put in place plans to bridge the gap. The recruitment of new staff will be for nothing if the NHS continues to struggle to retain staff – retention must be a priority for the government, and we would welcome clarity on plans to improve working conditions in the health service.

The wider workforce must also develop competencies in care for older people with frailty – this must be a core skill for all healthcare professionals. Professor Sir Chris Whitty has been clear that these are generalist skills that must be developed and maintained throughout people's careers ([Chief Medical Officer's annual report 2023: health in an ageing society](#), 2023). Only by training the wider healthcare workforce in how to manage people with multimorbidity and frailty, and by helping them to develop skills in realistic medicine, will sustainable healthcare for an ageing population be possible.

The Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, the Royal College of Physicians and the British Geriatrics Society are committed to this goal and have developed resources to support this type of training, including a [frailty e-learning course](#), co-produced with NHS England. We would be happy to work collaboratively not only to develop and disseminate these resources, but also to establish mechanisms that enable staff to develop and maintain their skills for older people.

We know from your previous work that you are sympathetic to the case that we make in this letter. You have a substantial task ahead of you in terms of defining solutions at a time when our health and social care system faces unprecedented challenge. Please take this correspondence as an offer of support and as an invitation to future dialogue if that would be helpful as you build your recommendations.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Andrew Elder
President

Professor Adam Gordon MBE
President

Dr Mumtaz Patel
Acting as president
Senior censor and vice president for
education and training



British Geriatrics Society
Improving healthcare
for older people



**Royal College
of Physicians**