

Prescriber 1990-2010: the changing face of the NHS

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- ▶ The Kennedy report into paediatric cardiac services in Bristol was published in 2001, leading to the introduction of clinical governance in the NHS.
- ▶ Evidence at the Bristol Inquiry revealed that doctors throughout the country had been hoarding organs without consent for teaching and research. In 2001, the Government announced an inquiry into practices in hospitals in Manchester and Liverpool's Alder Hey Hospital, culminating in new laws on informed consent.
- ▶ In 2000, Cheshire GP Harold Shipman was convicted of 15 murders by lethal injection with diamorphine; it is possible the actual tally was several hundred. The Shipman Inquiry Reports led to reforms of legislation on prescribing controlled drugs and death certification, a reformed GMC and revalidation for doctors.
- ▶ In 1998, Andrew Wakefield and colleagues published a paper in *The Lancet* reporting an association between MMR vaccine and autism. Subsequent media publicity substantially reduced uptake of the vaccine (in London, uptake fell to 60 per cent) but large observational studies have found no evidence to support a causal link.
- ▶ Generics company Regent GM lost its manufacturing licence in 1998, prompting a shortage of generic medicines and a hike in prices. Several companies were subsequently found to have colluded in price fixing at an estimated cost to the NHS of £200 million.
- ▶ As the phenomenal success of COX-2 selective NSAIDs grew, so did concerns about the risk of adverse cardiac effects. The first to go was rofecoxib (Vioxx), withdrawn in 2004 at a cost to manufacturer Merck estimated at \$14 billion. In 2007, the company paid out £2.3 billion in the USA to settle claims by 47 000 plaintiffs.

The past two decades have seen drastic changes to the way the NHS is managed and funded and at both local and national level. Steve Chaplin highlights the key reports, government policies and landmark events that have reshaped the NHS between 1990 and 2010.

Table 1. Landmark events of the last 20 years in health and therapeutics

The NHS has undergone huge changes in the past 20 years. Two decades under the leadership of four prime ministers and 10 health secretaries have seen radical shifts in philosophy and structure, and an unparalleled funding bonanza.

The Conservative years

By 1990 the NHS had already undergone major restructuring following, in 1979, *Patients First*, the

1980 Black report *Inequalities in Health*, and the introduction of general management with the 1984 Griffiths Report. In 1989, the Conservative government published *Working for Patients*, introducing the internal market into the NHS by splitting purchasers and providers. NHS trusts replaced hospital, ambulance and community health services, offering greater local self-determination. By 1997,

half of GPs were in fundholding practices and fears of a two-tier NHS were voiced openly. In 1996 the NHS Executive replaced regional health authorities.

Evidence-based medicine had been increasingly important for several years and became established in 1993 with the launch of the Cochrane Collaboration. In the same year, the European Medicines Agency opened its office in London.



Year ending March	Total NHS spending in the UK (£billion)
1990	26
1995	40
1996	42
1997	43
1998	46
1999	48
2000	53
2001	58
2002	64
2003	74
2004	82
2005	89
2006	98
2007	104

Table 2. Total NHS spending 1990-2007

A new era in self-treatment began in 1994 as the H₂-antagonists went over the counter. The Audit Commission found primary-care prescribing costs could be cut by 15 per cent without detriment to patient care (a finding to be echoed several times in one way or another over the coming years).

The year 1995 saw the beginnings of consolidation in the pharmaceutical industry as Glaxo bought Wellcome, BASF bought Boots, Hoechst bought Marion Merrell Dow, RPR bought Fisons and Pharmacia and Upjohn merge. This was followed in 1996 by the merger of Sandoz and Ciba-Geigy to form Novartis and, in 1999, that of Astra and Zeneca (ICI Pharmaceuticals). GSK was born in 2000 when Glaxo-Wellcome and SmithKline Beecham merged to form the world's largest pharmaceutical company.

Under Labour

In 1997, within seven months of a landslide election victory, the new Labour government published *The New NHS: Modern, Dependable* – its blueprint for the major modernisation agenda that was the 2000 *NHS*

Plan. New initiatives included health action zones and health improvement plans. Fundholding was abolished and 500 primary care groups (later 300 trusts) were created. Health authorities adopted a strategic role and primary care began its ascendancy.

Some ideas were slow burners. The Department of Health had proposed in 1990 that nurses should be able to prescribe selected medicines, but only in 1999 did the second Crown Report endorse the wider concept of nonmedical prescribing; the first nurse independent prescribers qualified in 2006. Dolly the sheep was cloned in 1996 but the first licence for therapeutic cloning was not granted until 2004 (to the Centre for Life in Newcastle).

The first pilot of NHS Direct was carried out in 1998 and PRODIGY went live. Professor Mike Rawlins became the first (and still only) Chair of the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE), which published its first technology appraisal (wisdom teeth removal) in 2000 and clinical guideline (mental health) in 2001.

In 1999, devolution split the NHS into four services. The Department of Health limited sildenafil (Viagra) prescribing to a short-list of long-term conditions and announced walk-in centres. The first National Service Framework

(mental health) was published, followed in 2000 by the far-reaching NSF on cardiovascular disease. The Government's response to repeated funding crises was an unprecedented cash injection of £2.1 billion in 2000, with a promise of real-terms uplift of 6.1 per cent annually for four years. The *quid pro quo* for this largesse was acceptance of the need for root and branch reform.

The full human genome was published in 2001. The National Patient Safety Agency was established in the same year, followed in 2002 by the Medicines and Health products Regulatory Agency and in 2003 by the Health Protection Agency. The 2002 *Wanless Report* on funding paved the way for a massive £40 billion cash injection over the next five years along with major changes in working practice. (The Government is now rumoured to be seeking £20 billion in cuts by 2014 and has been warned that this will cost the jobs of 10 per cent of the workforce.)

Community health councils were abolished in 2003 and foundation trusts established in 2004. The private sector got more involved as local treatment centres and private finance initiatives took hold. In 2006, 28 strategic health authorities were introduced, then cut to 10 and PCT numbers were halved.

Tobacco advertising was banned in 2003 and smoking in enclosed

- Variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease (vCJD) was first described in 1996, provoking fear of an epidemic after animals, otherwise vegetarian, were fed on meat products; 168 people in the UK have now been diagnosed with the infection and a further 190 may be diagnosed in the next 10 years.
- There were 8000 cases of severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) globally, with nearly 800 deaths between 2002 and 2003.
- Bird flu (H5N1) first emerged in 1997 and in 2005 reached the UK (in a sick parrot and later in a dead swan); 282 of 467 human cases confirmed by WHO were fatal.
- In 2009, pandemic swine flu (H1N1) prompted unprecedented efforts to provide possibly infected people with treatment and rush through a new vaccine, much of which is now being returned to the manufacturers.

Table 3. Public health scares that attracted widespread media attention

public places was banned in Scotland in 2006 and a year later in England and Wales. The new GP contract in 2004 came with the Quality Outcomes Framework; it included a wide range of targets for common conditions and practice standards, which GPs have easily achieved. NICE assumed responsibility for QOF in 2009.

Creating a Patient-led NHS (2005), *Our Health, Our Care, Our Say* (2006) and *Our NHS, Our Future* (2007) introduced a refocus of the NHS on choice and the needs of its users

rather than health professionals and managers. Money would now follow patients under Payment by Results. Among the many performance targets set by the Government, access to GPs was opened up and waiting times earned the most column inches and controversy.

A huge nationwide information strategy introduced Choose and Book and electronic prescriptions, but integrated records became mired in arguments about privacy. Power was consolidated in primary care with the introduction of prac-

tice-based commissioning, though not entirely successfully.

The latest Health Act came into force in November 2009. Introduced by Lord Darzi to provide a legal framework for the reforms he proposed in *NHS High Quality Care for All*, it offers greater control for patients (including pilots for personal health budgets) and establishes the place of the NHS Constitution.

Steve Chaplin is a pharmacist who specialises in writing on therapeutics