BMJ 2019;366:l5520 doi: 10.1136/bmj.l5520 (Published 18 September 2019)

VIEWS AND REVIEWS

ACUTE PERSPECTIVE

David Oliver: £25m for hospices won't go far

David Oliver *consultant in geriatrics and acute general medicine*

Berkshire

Last month the prime minister pledged a one-off payment of £25m (€28m; $31m) to boost hospices and palliative care services.[1] Boris Johnson's words were warm and supportive, hinting at more money soon. But was this more than a gesture?

Certainly, the pledge is there in a Number 10 press release,[2] including some positive reaction from the health secretary and charity chief executives at Hospice UK and Thames Hospice. Within a day of Johnson's announcement, however, the chair of NHS Clinical Commissioners told the *Health Service Journal* that the £25m would come from ringfencing existing NHS budgets, inevitably at the expense of other cash starved services.[3] Not new money after all, then.

Hospice UK recently conducted a survey on the current state of the hospice sector.[4 5] Some 73% of respondents had seen the funds they received from clinical commissioning groups frozen or cut, although their own costs were rising. One in three had been forced to cut services, and around half had delayed or cancelled plans to develop or expand them.

For financial context, the total NHS budget was around £125bn for 2017-18.[6] But Hospice UK's figures concluded that, in 2016-17, only 33% of hospice funding in England (about £350m) came from government, the rest coming from charity.[7] But why are hospices still "charitable," in a country with a national health service famously free at the point of delivery and funded from general taxation? It's a historical anomaly stemming from the separate origins of the hospice movement,[8] which surely needs to be tackled with more than token announcements of small redirections of funding.

In palliative medicine, specialist nurse practitioners and their colleagues in multidisciplinary teams have much to be proud of. Hospices don't just provide end-of-life care during final admissions but act as support hubs, venues for respite admissions, and places for symptom control.[7 9]

They're part of a wider palliative care ecosystem that also entails support from specialist clinical teams for end-of-life care in patients' own homes, including care homes. Palliative care services also provide support for hospital inpatients nearing the end of life.[10] With over 500 000 deaths a year, that specialist input is not possible for everyone who needs it, whether dying at home, in a care home, or in hospital. NHS England's *Atlas of Variation in End of Life Care*[11] and the Royal College of Physicians' audit of end-of-life care in hospital[12] have both shown geographical variations in our ability to support people dying out of hospital, palliative care for those who die in hospital, and availability of specialty support between regions and gaps in provision generally.[13 14]

Despite all of this, in 2015 the Economist Intelligence Unit ranked the UK first of 80 countries on an "end-of-life care index." It cited as principal factors the strength of the hospice movement and greater integration of palliative care with the NHS than in most of the world's healthcare systems.[15]

The National Survey of Bereaved People[16] has consistently shown that hospice care offers the best experience for families of dying people and the best symptom control. Nearly half of us will die in hospital when the time comes, but few people choose hospital as their preferred place of death when asked.[7]

The case for more investment in staff, capacity, and capital upgrades seems irrefutable. What could be more important than our one chance to get death right?[17]

This situation surely needs urgent redress, and, while the announcement of more funding is welcome, £25m of non-recurring investment is chickenfeed next to the scale of the problem.

Competing interests: See www.bmj.com/about-bmj/freelance-contributors.

Provenance and peer review: Commissioned; not externally peer reviewed.

1 Hewitt D. Hospices to get £25 million cash boost to secure future, Boris Johnson tells ITV News. *ITV News* 2019 Aug 20. https://www.itv.com/news/2019-08-20/hospices-to-get-25-million-cash-boost-to-secure-future-boris-johnson-announces/.
2 Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street; Johnson B. Prime Minister announces £25 million cash boost for hospices to secure their future. 20 Aug 2019. https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-25-million-cash-boost-for-hospices-to-secure-their-future.
3 Dunhill L. Funding boost for hospices promised by PM is not new money. *Health Serv J* 2019 Aug 21. https://www.hsj.co.uk/finance-and-efficiency/funding-boost-for-hospices-promised-by-pm-is-not-new-money/7025795.article. (Login needed.)
4 Hewitt D. Exclusive: UK Hospices face funding crisis as one in three forced to cut end of life services. *ITV News* 2019 May 7. https://www.itv.com/news/2019-05-07/hospice-funding-crisis-exclusive-survey-lack-government-funding-fundraising-hospice-uk-claire-house-children-hospice/.
5 Hospice UK. Rising costs and precarious "Jenga-like" funding model undermining capacity of hospices to meet demand for care. 7 May 2019. https://www.hospiceuk.org/about-hospice-care/media-centre/press-releases/details/2019/05/07/rising-costs-and-precarious-jenga-like-funding-model-undermining-capacity-of-hospices-to-meet-demand-for-care.

davidoliver372@googlemail.com Follow David on Twitter: @mancunianmedic

For personal use only: See rights and reprints http://www.bmj.com/permissions Subscribe: http://www.bmj.com/subscribe

BMJ: first published as 10.1136/bmj.l5520 on 18 September 2019. Downloaded from https://www.bmj.com/ on 24 April 2025 at Department GEZ-LTA Erasmushogeschool. Protected by copyright, including for uses related to text and data mining, AI training, and similar technologies.

6 King's Fund. The NHS budget and how it has changed. 5 Sep 2019. https://www.kingsfund.org.uk/projects/nhs-in-a-nutshell/nhs-budget.
7 Hospice UK. Facts and figures. https://www.hospiceuk.org/about-hospice-care/media-centre/facts-and-figures.
8 National Association of Hospice Fundraisers. History of the hospice movement. https://www.nahf.org.uk/about-national-association-of-hospice-fundraisers/history-of-the-hospice-movement.
9 Royal College of Physicians. Specialty spotlight—palliative medicine. https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/education-practice/advice/specialty-spotlight-palliative-medicine.
10 NHS England. Specialist level palliative care: information for commissioners. Apr 2016. https://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/speclst-palliatv-care-comms-guid.pdf.
11 Public Health England. Atlas of variation for palliative and end of life care in England. Available at: https://fingertips.phe.org.uk/profile/atlas-of-variation.
12 Royal College of Physicians. Census of consultant physicians and higher specialty trainees in the UK. 11 Dec 2015. https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/projects/census-consultant-physicians-and-higher-specialty-trainees-uk.
13 Public Health England. Official statistics: End of life care profiles—July 2019 data update. 2 Jul 2019. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/end-of-life-care-profiles-july-2019-data-update.
14 Royal College of Physicians. New RCP end of life care audit shows steady progress in care of dying people. 30 Mar 2016. https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/news/new-rcp-end-life-care-audit-shows-steady-progress-care-dying-people.
15 Economist Intelligence Unit. The 2015 quality of death index: country profiles. 2015. https://eiuperspectives.economist.com/sites/default/files/images/2015%20Quality%20of%20Death%20Index%20Country%20Profiles_Oct%206%20FINAL.pdf.
16 Office for National Statistics. National Survey of Bereaved People (VOICES): England, 2015. 22 Apr 2016. https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/healthandsocialcare/healthcaresystem/bulletins/nationalsurveyofbereavedpeoplevoices/england2015.
17 Leadership Alliance for the Care of Dying People. One chance to get it right. Jun 2014. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/323188/One_chance_to_get_it_right.pdf.

Published by the BMJ Publishing Group Limited. For permission to use (where not already granted under a licence) please go to http://group.bmj.com/group/rights-licensing/permissions

BMJ: first published as 10.1136/bmj.l5520 on 18 September 2019. Downloaded from https://www.bmj.com/ on 24 April 2025 at Department GEZ-LTA Erasmushogeschool. Protected by copyright, including for uses related to text and data mining, AI training, and similar technologies.