How and why will hospitals have changed in Finland by 2029?

The Finnish population is aging rapidly as in many parts of the world. This leads inevitably to increasing prevalence of chronic diseases and multi-morbidity. The need for health care services, including hospital treatment, increases and poses new challenges to the health care system. At the same time, the working population will get smaller and as a result the tax revenue will decrease, widening the sustainability gap. How can we deliver more high-quality health care services for our citizens with less money?

Another challenge is due to migration within Finland. The northern and eastern parts of Finland are losing their young and working-age population to the rapidly growing southern and western areas. This means that they will have great difficulties in the recruitment of health care personnel to meet the needs of their population.

The third problem we are facing is how to keep pace with medical advances and maintain the high level of medical know-how and skills in different parts of the country. This is especially difficult in the areas that are losing their population. The public health care system should be able to offer services equally to all.

The problems concerning recruiting and expertise will most likely be solved by concentrating the services and developing collaborative work patterns between hospitals. We need to evaluate which services must be available near the patients’ homes and what can be arranged more concentrated in large hospital units. It is also important for the hospitals to develop and improve cooperation with primary health care. IT innovations must be applied to modernize care delivery by electronic and mobile services. The trend is shifting towards integrated health service networks and systems.

Economic challenges call for re-thinking of service delivery. To take care of increasing demands with diminishing resources, we need to strengthen prevention and rehabilitation to enable the elderly population to get along in their own homes as long as possible.

We also need to improve hospital efficiency. New medications and other treatment technologies are being developed. They are usually more effective but also more expensive than the old. Before introducing new medications and other treatment methods in routine use, we need to evaluate their cost-effectiveness and value to the patients. It is important to ensure the most cost-effective use of financial resources invested in health care by the society.

The developing role of hospitals in Finland is a part of the social and health care reform in preparation. It is widely agreed that the reform is necessary, but it is still politically very difficult to perform. Reorganizing the tasks and roles of the hospitals is being opposed in many areas, because there will be winners and losers. Some hospitals may receive new responsibilities, and others may lose some of their tasks. A hospital has great significance to its location. It is important for the population’s feeling of security and also plays an important role as a significant employer in its area. Therefore, it is understandable that especially small municipalities are afraid of their hospital losing its status. The necessity of the social and health care reform and the changes that are needed in the hospital system must be properly introduced to the citizens.

About the Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities

The Association of Finnish Local and Regional Authorities is the representative of municipal health care providers. The Association brings the voice of municipalities and the entire local government sector to social debate and decision-making. The Association’s core tasks are to advance the interests and development of municipalities and their partner organizations and to provide services for them. The Association has multidisciplinary competence and a broad understanding of all aspects of local government work. It employs a staff of about 230 people, who are mostly in expert positions. The main office, the House of Municipalities, is located in Helsinki.