An Insight into the Future of the Healthcare and Hospital System

The present healthcare and hospital system is essentially a ‘sick-care’ system, built in the middle of the last century. Although there has been tremendous progress in the areas of medical diagnosis and treatments, care delivery hasn’t structurally changed much at all. It is still largely based on bricks and mortar, where people who are sick or acutely ill come to be seen and treated by medically trained people. Funding models are based on short episodic consultations that are specifically designed for quick turnover. It was never designed to deal with the huge growth of chronic disease which now represents well over 80 percent of all healthcare spending.

So, there needs to be a paradigm shift from hospital-based disease intervention to community-based management. Changing health needs and an aging population mean we need to reorientate health systems towards prevention of illness and supporting people with multiple chronic and long-term conditions. It is increasingly common for people to present with multiple conditions, such as diabetes, cancer and early stages of dementia. These complex needs are hard to address in a system that operates in silos with little interaction between hospital and community services.

Hospitals will still be an important part of healthcare provision for some patients some of the time. Generally, however, we should stop thinking about hospitals, beds and buildings, and instead think about the reality of people’s lives. Health services should be integrated and coordinated to support people living their lives as normally as possible at home, or as close to their homes as possible.

This will have a profound and long-lasting effect on the workforce and how it is trained, educated, developed and supported to deliver care in new ways that meet the needs of the people that healthcare staff serve. Hospitals, as employers, will have to step up their performance in these areas if they are to retain the nursing staff they so desperately need.

Healthcare systems need to be much more integrated, with hospitals working closely with community and social care services to keep people out of the hospital, if possible. When people are admitted to the hospital it should be for the shortest period possible: hospitals are expensive and just about everyone prefers to be at home whenever possible.

Staffing is a vital element in this process and better use of existing staff by investing in them through training and upskilling will be vital. Nursing roles can be developed so that they can work across the whole system to ensure that prevention, coordination, maintenance and early detection of deteriorating patients receive the priority attention that they deserve. Whenever such changes are anticipated, it is important to involve staff in the process so that their experience and ideas can be incorporated into any new regime.

One of the challenges that hospitals face is their financing systems. If payments and incentives are all about doing more and more inpatient work - which effectively is an illness-based system - it is going to take a step change to shift processes from a hospital-centric system to one that is focused on the health of the patients and the whole health system.

It will be increasingly important that patients are supported in navigating their way around and through this new type of system to ensure that they can access the right care at the right time at the right place from the right provider.

One important aspect of hospital work that must be addressed is care of the dying. No one wants to be stuck in the hospital or be in and out of the hospital in the last months of their lives. A big challenge will be to make sure that everyone who wants to die comfortably at home is able to do so.

New technology will help with many of these challenges, especially in improving access to services for rural populations and vulnerable groups. The application of technological innovations can also improve the quality of patient care, the safety of healthcare delivery and the working conditions of healthcare workers.

It goes without saying that the nursing workforce is critical at all stages of these necessary developments. Nurses will always be at the patients’ side providing hands-on care in whatever setting, whether at home, in the workplace or school, in the hospital or on the street.

Nurses in advanced practice roles are able to lead innovative services that can be shaped to meet the changing needs of patients, and independently manage their long-term conditions. Such services are efficient, effective and well-liked by patients, who get a high-quality service that is local, approachable and convenient.

Nurses will have an increasing role in shaping future health services, and their unique knowledge and approach to patient care will be invaluable to the success of the hospital of the future and its place within an integrated, prevention-oriented health service.