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BMA responds to Government White Paper on care outside of hospitals

An increased focus on prevention and making services more responsive to patients and closer to them are welcome but there must be the capacity and resources to make this happen, says the British Medical Association as the Government today (30/1/06) launches its White Paper (for England) "Our health, our care, our say: a new direction in community services".

Commenting on the White Paper, Dr Hamish Meldrum, chairman of the BMA's GPs committee said: "GP practices are well-liked and trusted by their patients and would like to become even more accessible and responsive to patients' needs but the Government must do more to address the underlying problem of capacity if this is to become a reality. We still have a shortage of family doctors and fewer GPs per head of the population than most other countries in Western Europe.

"Many practices are already offering longer opening hours but there will need to be resources in place to expand this more widely. We cannot stretch our existing workforce any further.

"Extending the use of the independent sector should only happen where there is an identified need and where existing providers have already been given the chance to deliver the service. In many cases there has been serious under-investment in staff and premises over the years. There must also be equal access to funding and an equitable bidding process.

"Patients value being able to access services closer to their home and doctors in both primary and secondary care will wish to work together to look at how services can be planned locally to best deliver high quality, local care. Furthermore, moving care away from hospitals into the community may not always be the most cost-effective option.

"We will need further detail from the Government on where the money is going to come from to fund these changes. Investing more in primary and preventive care is not just simply a case of disinvesting in secondary care.

"An NHS life-check may be useful for some patients but there is a concern that they will largely appeal to the 'worried well'. Prevention should focus on those patients who are most at risk and initiatives that target under-privileged areas are likely to be more effective in tackling ill-health and helping to lessen health inequalities.

"We look forward to examining the detail of the White Paper and working with the Government to develop and deliver sensible proposals that are cost-effective, have proven health benefits, and make the best and most appropriate use of our workforce."

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