Health in a cold climate

The British economy is edging out of a severe economic recession, during which the future of international financial systems seemed in doubt. The scale of debt is comparable to that following the Second World War, and national borrowing is predicted to reach 80% of gross domestic product by 2013. We have suffered a permanent loss in national output of 6–7%. The inevitable reduction in funding for public services is already being discussed widely by the political parties. It is timely to consider the possible impacts on the NHS, which has enjoyed real increases in funding of almost 7% per year in England up to 2010/11, overall and on general practice. We believe that spending decisions should hinge on three important principles. First, strong primary care is the foundation of a successful equitable healthcare system that delivers good outcomes. It is not special pleading that allows us to assert that primary care must be the last part of a healthcare system to be cut — there is hard evidence that strong primary care can salvage our healthcare system. Barbara Starfield’s work needs no further introduction, and the health secretary in England recently celebrated the publication of the Commonwealth Fund report.3

Second, remember what is at the heart of what we do in general practice, where over 80% of patient–doctor contact in the NHS occurs. The consultation is the most crucial, constructive, and potentially productive exchange within our healthcare system (think of prescribing decisions, think of gatekeeping). We should use it as the starting point in making difficult spending (and cutting) decisions. Fund the health service at that central core — the further away from the core, the more challenging it is likely to become to justify protecting current expenditure.

Finally, decision making about spending and cutting must be informed by clinicians and their patients, particularly in primary care. Our contributors brim with enthusiasm, commitment, pragmatism, and wisdom. Clinicians need to stand up and be counted.

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REFERENCES

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