

Executive Summary

What a Waste!

Understanding how health and care can reduce inappropriate waste

May 2023

Dealing with the issue of waste in health and care has been discussed by policy makers, politicians and healthcare professionals since the NHS was founded in 1948. This report calls for a focus on the problem of inappropriate waste in the delivery of health and social care in Wales and urgent action to address it. Reducing waste will play a crucial role in tackling the enormous challenges ahead and in developing more prudent and economically, socially, and sustainable services and support. There are already several good examples of how the 5 Rs' ('Reduce, Reuse, Reprocessed, Renewable, Recycle') are informing practices in the NHS but more needs to be done. It will need everyone to take responsibility and play a part.

Waste occurs across a wide range of areas, some of which may be more evident and tractable than others. This paper provides an initial overview of the spectrum of waste in health and care, drawing upon wider evidence and particularly the work undertaken by Berwick and Hackbarth (2012) on healthcare waste in the USA. We build on their argument to suggest that the triple issue of climate change, austerity and the covid backlog has heightened the urgency for professionals, patients, and politicians alike, creating a unique opportunity to take concerted action to address this. We also maintain that any response should be underpinned by the principles of prudent healthcare.

Our typology redefines waste into 6 categories: workforce, administration, services, treatment, energy, and systems (WASTES). We set out the prevailing issues under each of these headings and suggest how the concept of prudent healthcare can help us to tackle waste in health and care settings.

WASTES allows us to more clearly see the major areas which need to be tackled. It identifies examples of issues such as overtreatment and energy use, medicines and equipment waste and the opportunities to make changes and monitor impact. It has also exposed the gaps or inconsistencies of data collection and opportunities to address these moving forward.

We recognise that waste is not the responsibility of any one organisation or professional – it is indeed everyone's responsibility, the public, patients, and professionals. If we are to address the future sustainability of the health and care system, economically, environmentally, and socially, then we will also need to explore further the concepts of acknowledge, inform, persuade, and pay, to encourage the full engagement and responsibility of all stakeholders in reducing waste.

In response, the Bevan Commission's 'Let's Not Waste'[1] programme has been established to address this, providing a platform and 'call to action' to begin to bring people and organisations together to find better solutions to reduce waste together.

Everyone involved in writing this report was aware of waste and the need to tackle it. While there is support at all levels for the drive to reduce waste there is no framework for ensuring collective responsibility and accountability for action to drive waste reduction.

1. Bevan Commission. Let's not waste. 2023 [cited 2023 30 March 2023]; Available from: <https://www.bevancommission.org/lets-not-waste/>.

Comisiwn Bevan Commission

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School of Management,
Swansea University Bay Campus,
Fabian Way, Swansea SA1 8EN

www.bevancommission.org
bevan-commission@swansea.ac.uk
+44 (0)1792 604 630
