

Introduction

IN NOVEMBER 2006 the Queensland Centre for Public Health and the Brisbane Institute co-hosted a public forum titled “What can we expect of our health care system?”

The intention of the forum was to promote public discussion on serious questions about the long-term sustainability of the health care system. Even as health care expenditure has grown, demand for service remains unmet and appears inexhaustible. Expensive new technologies and drugs, a population living longer with more chronic disease, and declining workforce capacity indicate a worsening of the current situation. The gap between our demand for health care and the capacity of the system appears likely to increase.

In light of such a scenario, this forum considered what citizens can reasonably expect of their health system. Consumer expectations are a large part of the health care equation. In Australia, a wealthy society with egalitarian traditions, the great majority of people expect to be provided with the most advanced medical treatment available. In contrast with an earlier historical period in which life was viewed as far more

contingent and unpredictable, we now routinely expect to live long and fulfilled lives, with the aid of sophisticated health care.

Are contemporary expectations realistic? Are we entitled to believe that expensive technology and drugs should be available to everyone, irrespective of time, place, or stage of life? Have we arrived at a situation in which life has been valued too highly? Do current trends risk creating an inequitable and dysfunctional health care system? Is it possible to constrain expectations without compromising standards of care?

The forum featured presentations and a panel discussion involving a range of expert speakers, decision makers, analysts and stakeholders. The following two papers by Dr Stephen Begg and Professor Peter Brooks have been submitted as an outcome of the forum.

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