

Never mind the bankers — the credit crunch will have a deep impact on our patients

John Timmons

The global economic crisis has been in the news now for more than six months, in fact the 'credit crunch' was first mentioned in the media last summer. Britain is now in the midst of economic recession and generally the mood of the country is low.

I am a little concerned that the focus has been on how those involved in the banking industry will be facing hard times without their large bonuses, without a thought about what £500bn — the cost of the government bail-out of the banking system — could do for the NHS. I think a few years without the need to ration care might be in order, and maybe a few more nurses and doctors would prove to be useful. I understand, however, that this money has now been invested elsewhere and although the NHS may benefit in the long term it is nice to dream of a similar sum being offered to 'bail out' the service.

Without doubt the financial crisis will have a knock-on effect on our patients. For one there may be an increase in stress-related illnesses due to increasing hardships — the struggle to pay fuel bills, stay warm, pay the mortgage and to eat healthy meals. The rising cost of food and fuel will affect our elderly patients more than most. As a service, the NHS has always promoted the message of eating well and staying healthy, but this will become more and more difficult particularly for the older patients that we treat.

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The real cost of the financial crisis to the health service may be that more patients with increasingly complex pathologies will be admitted as a result of not being able to heat their homes or to make a hot meal. Those with chronic wounds may suffer from even more social isolation as their money is stretched, and they may become increasingly depressed as a result.

Chronic wounds are often debilitating for patients. Leg ulcers and pressure ulcers with exudate and odour can be depressing, and the reduced mobility which will often

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accompany such wounds will all add up to a severe reduction in a patient's quality of life.

As nurses we have to be responsible for more than just basic nursing care. Our patients will need more support than ever before. This support may mean increasing social care provision, accessing benefits and providing more frequent visits. Discharge planning from secondary care settings will have to take into account the ability to provide adequate heating in homes on top of the normal home assessments which are carried out.

Much is made of the need for those who are more able in society to have a greater degree of social responsibility — taking care of older neighbours and creating a sense of community. Nurses already do this work informally, but there are not enough of them to reach everyone in need. As a result, winter will see more patients being admitted to acute care — an indirect result of our social care network being unable to cope with added pressure.

Without social support from friends and family some patients will need to be moved into a care setting, which is often associated with a loss of independence. For many it is difficult to accept that they have to hand over responsibility for themselves to others. It would seem then that the impact of the credit crunch will see those people who are most vulnerable in society become even more exposed to conditions which may put them in need of extra care.

Whether specialist or healthcare assistant, we all have a role to play in ensuring that patients' standards of living are acceptable — and we also need to become skilful in recognising when patients are in need of extra support — particularly in these difficult times. **WUK**

Rose Cooper, Wounds UK board member, will be giving a lecture on Honey and Healing as part of the University of Wales Institute's professorial and inaugural lectures. It takes place on Wednesday 26th November at the UWIC Llandaff Campus, Cardiff University at 6pm. Anyone interested in attending can reserve a seat by telephoning 029 2041 6053, or e-mailing: jdoran@uwic.ac.uk or alternatively visit www.uwic.ac.uk/lectures