

Guest Editorial

The Economy of Wellbeing

Anna Mckeever

By its very nature, wellbeing is a slippery beast. Generally, it describes a holistic picture of wellness encompassing various attributes; physical, social and emotional. As such, it is difficult to differentiate specific components, and even harder to nail down as a quantifiable measure.

The fundamental purpose of medical professionals; to care for the health and wellbeing of their patients, is an increasingly impossible task. Doctors are expected to fix people, quickly, and at as low a cost as possible. Management and professional practices emphasise process and productivity, but fail to acknowledge the need for a much wider systems based approach to health and wellbeing.

Non communicable diseases (NCDs) are cited by the WHO (World Health Organisation) as the leading cause of death, disease and disability in the European Region.¹ These lifestyle related diseases put significant strain on the health systems working to treat patients, well-being of the population, and overall economic development. As such, doctors can play their role as efficiently and effectively as possible, but until there is recognition that the health and wellbeing of our population is a system wide problem that requires a system wide solution, they are fighting a losing battle.

Good wellbeing has been recognised as a positive predictor of health, as well as protective against all-cause mortality.² The health sector has historically focussed on diagnosis and treatment of illness, and timely intervention. Whilst acknowledging the need for specialist intervention for illness, there is a requirement to move from a deficit based model of health and wellbeing, to one where it is viewed as a universal asset to be strengthened and protected. This requires a change in conversation about health and wellbeing, and most importantly, where responsibility lies.³

So how do we place wellbeing on the political agenda?

There are several obstacles:

1. Intersectoral/interdivisional collaboration
2. Evidence the impact of wellbeing on economic productivity
3. Measurement/indicators of population wellbeing

Intersect oral/interdivisional collaboration

Enhancing wellbeing is not as simple as equipping individuals with a personalised “toolkit” to help withstand adversity. We must also work to build systems and design policies

with the common goal of enhancing this core principle. Amongst many others, wellbeing relies on good working environments, accessible public transport, green spaces, social support and inclusion across the life course. This requires a comprehensive systemic approach and a wide recognition of the shared responsibility to enhance population wellbeing; which spans numerous government departments and sectors.

The WHO have voiced their support for member states to strengthen their health system response to NCDs; highlighting the importance of enhanced analytics and technical assistance to facilitate a new policy dialogue and knowledge exchange.¹ Once accepted as a strategic imperative across all government departments, it is a potential common concept from which to unite policies and actions across agencies.⁴ The responsibilities for health and wellbeing cannot, and must not, belong solely to the health sector.

Evidence the impact of wellbeing on economic productivity

The need for an alternative measurement beyond GDP (Gross Domestic Product) to measure economic performance and societal success is well recognised.⁵ In 2018 the ONS (Office of National Statistics) began its “Beyond GDP” initiative, part of which looks at economic wellbeing indicators. Organisations such as the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) have played a prominent role in the development of “multi-dimensional well-being” measures, through creating instruments such as the OECD Well-being Framework as a means of conducting research and allowing for comprehensive measurement. The New Economics Foundation recently published a report⁶ describing the positive impact personal wellbeing can have on the nation’s health, work and productivity, as well as being linked to outcomes such as a strong society and economy. It is estimated that that for every 10% increase in NCD mortality, economic growth is reduced by 0.5%.¹

There is a need for robust evaluation and measurement to generate evidence is required in order to secure wellbeing’s place on the political agenda. There have been nods towards a strategic approach to wellbeing in the UK, with the widespread adoption of the “Five Ways to Wellbeing” framework, but fundamentally, there has been no evaluation of the impact of the initiative.⁷ There is reluctance from any one department to take ownership of the wellbeing beast. As a result, many hands are in the mix, but without a firm steer there remains a fragmented, disjointed approach to a holistic problem.



UMJ is an open access publication of the Ulster Medical Society (<http://www.ums.ac.uk>).

The Ulster Medical Society grants to all users on the basis of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International Licence the right to alter or build upon the work non-commercially, as long as the author is credited and the new creation is licensed under identical terms.

Measurement/indicators of population wellbeing

The development of a wellbeing index does not mean reinventing the wheel. A large amount of routinely collected data can be interpreted via a wellbeing lens, and used to provide strategic direction for health improvement work; such as the Early Years Collaborative in Scotland.⁸ By pointing out existing win-win situations out with the health sector, we can agree indicators that are not mutually exclusive and work towards a common goal. This allows large-scale population interventions (that lie out with the health sector) and individualized health services to work from the same data set; pooling resources and aligning strategies. A renewed shift of focus toward enhancing wellbeing requires improving literacy in the public sector; particularly in sectors that are not used to viewing wellbeing as part of their remit. There is a role for organisational “spanners” or professionals whose responsibility is to work to facilitate collaborative working between sectors; driving a shift in policy toward prevention and research generation.

Putting wellbeing on the political agenda is as much a cultural shift as it is an economic and political one. Particularly at this time of political and social unrest, it is both a moral and economic imperative that decision makers are the first to start the conversation about the need to invest in the wellbeing as a means of building a happier, healthier, and more prosperous UK. The common goal of enhanced wellbeing should not be a hastily conceived considered afterthought, but has the potential to fundamentally challenge the way in which policy is conceived. Wellbeing is good for business, and that makes it *everyone's* business.

Dr Anna McKeever, ST4 Public Health Speciality Registrar
E-mail: Anna.McKeever@hscni.net

REFERENCES

1. World Health Organization. Health topics. Health systems response to NCDs. [Internet]. Barcelona: World Health Organization; 2020. Available from <http://www.euro.who.int/en/health-topics/Health-systems/health-systems-response-to-ncds>. Last accessed February 2020.
2. Keyes CL, Simoes EJ. To flourish or not: positive mental health and all-cause mortality. *Am J Public Health*. 2012; 102(11): 2164-72.
3. Goldie I, Elliott I, Regan M, Bernal L, Makurah L. Mental health and prevention: taking local action for better mental health. Policy Report. London: Mental Health Foundation; 2016. Available from: <https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/mental-health-and-prevention-taking-local-action-better-mental-health>. Last accessed February 2020.
4. Nunes AR, Lee K, O’Riordan T. The importance of an integrating framework for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals: the example of health and well-being. *BMJ Global Health*. 1(3): e000068.
5. Tonkin R. News and insight from the Office for National Statistics. National Statistical Beyond GDP: How ONS is developing wider measures of the UK economy. London: Office for National Statistics; 2018. Available from: [https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2018/10/01/beyond-](https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2018/10/01/beyond-gdp-how-ONS-is-developing-wider-measures-of-the-uk-economy/)

[gdp-how-ONS-is-developing-wider-measures-of-the-uk-economy/](https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2018/10/01/beyond-gdp-how-ONS-is-developing-wider-measures-of-the-uk-economy/) Last accessed February 2020.

6. Quick A, Abdallah S. Ucando-it. Social Action Reward and Recognition Programmes. Why personal wellbeing is good for the nation’s health. Novacroft. Northampton, UK: Novacroft; ca 2016. Available from: https://www.novacroft.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/Novacroft_Thought_Paper_WELL_BEING.pdf. Last accessed February 2020.
7. What Works Wellbeing. Evidence gap: five ways to wellbeing. Blog. [Internet]. London: What Works Wellbeing; 2017. Available from: <https://whatworkswellbeing.org/blog/evidence-gap-five-ways-to-wellbeing/#> Last accessed February 2020.
8. McPhee A. East Ayrshire Community Planning Partnership Board: 26 May 2016. Community Planning Update. Report by Deputy Chief Executive and Chief Financial Officer Economy and Skills. Kilmarnock, Scotland: East Ayrshire Council; 2016. Available from: https://docs.east-ayrshire.gov.uk/crpadmmin/2012%20agendas/community%20planning/may%202016/agenda_item_7_community_planning_update_may2016.pdf. Last accessed February 2020.

