

THE CONVERSATION

Academic rigour, journalistic flair

At last, young people's voices are being heard about the future of the NHS

September 26, 2017 6.07pm BST



Making their mark: the NHS England Youth Forum. University of Hertfordshire, Author provided

Authors



Lisa Whiting

Principal Lecturer and Professional Lead,
Children's Nursing, University of
Hertfordshire



Gary Meager

Lecturer in Children's Nursing, University of
Hertfordshire & Children's Community
Rapid Response Nurse Practitioner,
University of Hertfordshire



Julia Petty

Senior Lecturer in Children's Nursing,
University of Hertfordshire



Sheila Roberts

Senior lecturer, Children's Nursing,
University of Hertfordshire, University of
Hertfordshire

For me, [being part of the NHS forum] was like being introduced to a whole new world. I wasn't aware that young people could be offered opportunities like that, to actually talk to key decision makers and get people from really important organisations wanting to come and talk to us ... It's helped me with my communication skills ... it's taught me how to speak properly and confidently.

—

This was Georgia talking about her involvement in the NHS England Youth Forum (NHSEYF) in 2016. It aims to improve health services for young people and to give them a voice on health issues that matter most to them.

A team from the University of Hertfordshire carried out an examination of the work of this forum. We found that the young people were highly motivated and committed to being involved in decision-making about NHS services. They found contributing to society through this forum a valuable opportunity and welcomed having their voices heard.

What emerged from our interviews was how much commitment there is among young people about the future of the NHS. Here's Josh:

It's a major concern for me about the NHS ... and I want to improve it, I want to give back ... After being elected as young mayor in our local area ... we get lots of opportunities about how we can contribute back to society and one of them was the NHS Youth Forum ... I saw it and I thought what a brilliant opportunity that would be to kind of get my voice heard, obviously as a service user but also as someone who represents young people locally. It was a brilliant opportunity.

Georgia, who we have heard from before, had another more personal reason for being committed to having a say in the running of the NHS:

The reasons behind why I wanted to join were more personal ... I was quite passionate about mental health because my [relative] suffers from schizophrenia.

It is important to listen to young people about services that directly affect them. In the UK, the idea of youth forums is now well recognised. There are more than 620 youth councils and forums in existence aiming to give young people the opportunity to be involved in decision-making in their local communities. One example is the High Trees Community Development Trust which focuses on social issues that affect young people and provides training and support so that they can feel confident to participate in the decision-making process.

What is the NHS England Youth Forum?

The NHSEYF was established in 2014 to allow young people to participate in decision-making about the NHS. The aim was to give young people the opportunity to have a voice and “to contribute to improving and developing services for young people”.

There are 25 members of the NHSEYF ranging between the ages of 11 and 25. Publicity snowballed with the introduction of their own website, Facebook page and Twitter feed. Following the establishment of the NHSEYF, a number of other local forums for children and young people have developed within local hospitals and other areas across the UK including England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Getting involved

We found that NHSEYF members were involved in an extensive range of activities and commitments at local level – including hospital committee membership, local youth forum events and seminars as well as high-profile national events such as the National Children’s Inpatient Survey, national conferences and attendance at the NHS Citizen’s Assembly.

Attending these events raised the profile of children and young people’s needs and allowed the NHSEYF’s members to be active in consultancy-type roles. Our interviews with participants provided clear evidence that the young people were highly motivated and committed to the giving of their own time to ensure the youth voice was heard and represented.

The young people play a pivotal role within NHS England and their knowledge of their home community enabled them to network with professionals and peers within local and national government arenas in order to influence and get involved in decisions about children and young people’s care needs. Evidence from the data collected suggests that the personal growth and development of the young people involved is also likely to have influenced the success of the NHSEYF.

Measuring impact

Our evaluation of the NHSEYF clearly demonstrates the impact of the voice of young people. The Youth Forum Wheel (below) was developed to highlight key areas of importance, as a model that can be applied elsewhere.



The Youth Forum Wheel [YFW]

The YFW is offered as a model that has the potential to underpin the development of other youth forums, both within and outside of a health context. University of Hertfordshire, Author provided

It's important that central and local government measures improvement outcomes for people's health and/or lifestyles by listening to their views directly rather than focusing on statistics or figures. There is also a recent growing emphasis on services actively involving children, young people and parents and/or carers in the commissioning, development and evaluation of services.

There is a need for ongoing research and funding to ensure that this youth forum model is widely recognised and extended. At the heart of this is recognising the commitment, motivation and enthusiasm shown by these young people in positively influencing service provision for children and young people. As one of our interview subjects concluded:

I think the most key point is showing adults that young people want to have their voices heard ... yes the NHS England Youth Forum has done its job because health professionals were coming to speak to us and saying: 'Oh, how do we engage with people?'

It is about time we listened to the young people who will determine the future health of the country and take their views seriously. The NHS England Youth Forum aims to do just that.

Youth Forum members' names have been changed in line with the ethics requirements of the project.

 [NHS](#) [NHS data](#) [Youth health](#) 

Found this article useful? A gift of £20/month helps deliver knowledge-based, ethical journalism.

[Make a donation](#)