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## Technology, innovation and the changing face of health care

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At some point in our lives, we all need to see a doctor. For some, however, getting access to good, affordable health care is a real challenge.

In December, a report from the World Bank and World Health Organization (WHO) stated that at least half of the planet's population was unable to obtain essential health services.

Moreover, the report found that 800 million people spent at least 10 percent of their household budgets on health expenses for themselves, an unwell child or another family member. For nearly 100 million people, those expenses were described as being big enough to push them into "extreme poverty."

At the time, the WHO's director general, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, said it was "completely unacceptable that half the world still lacks coverage for the most essential health services."

He said that a solution existed in the form of universal health coverage, or UHC. Such a system would allow "everyone to obtain the health services they need, when and where they need them, without facing financial hardship."

The U.K.'s take on UHC, the National Health Service (NHS), has been running since 1948. Today, the NHS employs over 1.5 million people, and it's still guided by the three core principles that underpinned its launch — that it should meet the needs of all, be free at the point of delivery, and based on clinical need rather than a person's ability to pay.

As the NHS nears its 70th anniversary in July, efforts are underway to ensure that it continues to innovate. For example, a number of Academic Health Science Networks (AHSNs) have been set up to, in the words of NHS England, “deliver a step-change in the way the NHS identifies, develops and adopts new technologies.”

Mike Hannay is chair of the AHSN. “We recognize that it can be really hard to get digital innovations into the NHS,” he told CNBC's Nadine Dereza in an interview broadcast this week. “It's a real challenge for everyone.”

“The only way that will happen is if there's a real need — too often we see innovations that are solutions looking for problems and what we really need are solutions that address real problems within the system,” he added.

Hannay said that the AHSN often saw itself as a matchmaker, identifying challenges within the NHS and then working with clinicians, system managers and innovators to match problems to solutions.

One scheme looking to introduce new ideas to the health care system is the NHS Innovation Accelerator (NIA), which is delivered in partnership with all 15 of the AHSNs in England. As NHS England puts it, the NIA aims to speed up the uptake of “high-impact innovations for patient, population and NHS staff benefit.”

In 2016, the business DrDoctor was chosen as an innovation fellow by the NIA. The company has developed technology that allows patients to view, change and schedule outpatient appointments on their computer, using an app on their smartphone, or via SMS.

“We've built it with patients in mind, and we've talked to people about what matters to them on the day,” Tom Whicher, a founder of DrDoctor, told CNBC.

Mike Hannay, chair of the AHSN, described DrDoctor as a fantastic innovation. “It's all about patient-centred care, and making sure we put the patient right at the heart of what we're trying to do. And it drives down the cost of care as well.”

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