

The Right Honourable Secretary of State for Health
Department of Health
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We are delighted that the Government is committed to improving public health and focusing on improved outcomes. The Coalition's programme for government notes the need to 'encourage behaviour change to help people live healthier lives'. The programme also promises 'an ambitious strategy to prevent ill-health which harnesses innovative techniques to help people take responsibility for their own health'.

The reality is that much of the heavy lifting in enabling improved social outcomes in this area will fall to families. In National Family Week we are writing to a number of government departments highlighting the fact that without a champion at the heart of government, the family-friendly agenda is unlikely to succeed. There needs to be clear top-level leadership on the family and family policy should have a central role in government, based perhaps at the Cabinet Office. Becoming family-friendly requires a co-ordinated plan as there are implications for every government department. The Government has recognised this is true of the Big Society – it has Cabinet level responsibility and a clear strategy. In light of this I hope you will recognise the role of families in improving health outcomes by ensuring that your department commits to fully support an integrated government-wide approach to strengthening families.

The ability of your department to secure improved health outcomes and manage cost pressures will also depend on the actions of other departments with regard to families. We would be interested to know what proportion of improved health outcomes you see as being dependent on strengthening family relationships and how the department will monitor progress in this area.

The Relationships Foundation estimates that the annual health and social care costs linked to family breakdown are over £13 billion a year, with the health status of men and children being particularly influenced by family relationships.¹ This exceeds the additional welfare and benefit costs that can be linked to family breakdown. These costs arise from increased use of GP services, costs of domestic violence, prescription costs, children in care, and impaired mental health, amongst others. Families

¹ See *When Relationships Go Right/When Relationships Go Wrong* (2009) <http://tiny.cc/WhenRelationships> updated for 2010 in *Counting the Cost of Family Failure* <http://tiny.cc/FailureCost>

provide social care and support worth some £73 billion a year and given the future care needs of an ageing population, families' capacity to provide care will be an essential element of any solution.

The correlations between relationships and health outcomes are becoming increasingly well understood. The report of the US National Working Group on Family-Based Interventions in Chronic Disease, for example, found that 'the interpersonal relationships within the family setting affect the physiologic functioning of the patient and the behavioral and emotional lives of all family members. Both affect proximal outcomes (ie, poor glucose control or poorly controlled hypertension) and distal outcomes (ie, diabetes complications or cardiovascular incidents).' Social relationships in general, and family relationships in particular, can reduce the incidence of such ailments as stroke, heart disease, cancer and mental health, as well as improving recovery rates. Family relationships also influence risky behaviours, including those linked to sexually transmitted infections, drugs and alcohol abuse.

Your Department has its own contribution to make to supporting families through the role of health visitors, who can support both couple and parenting relationships, as well as the wider work of the NHS in reducing the pressures on family relationships that can arise from chronic ill health and inadequate care.

We hope that you will take the opportunity of National Family Week to signal a clear commitment to support a government-wide strategy for the family. We were very encouraged to see in the *Invitation to Join the Government of Britain* the assurance that 'Britain's families will get our full backing across all our policies.' This commitment must, surely, be built into the heart of the policymaking process. Stronger, more stable families could over time save your Department billions of pounds each year – satisfying continuing demands for progress while reducing the fiscal deficit.

With best wishes,

Michael

Michael Trend CBE

Executive Director

Relationships Foundation