



Public Health
England

Protecting and improving the nation's health



Duncan Selbie
Chief Executive

Friday message

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Dear everyone

I have spent this week in Sierra Leone catching up with our teams on the post Ebola work. It is a stunning country with near absolute poverty everywhere but with amazing people and a community resilience that is astonishing. It is no exaggeration to say our people have been equally astonishing, working throughout the outbreak and in its aftermath with bravery, tenacity and a selflessness which is of singular credit to the UK and to each of them. Our work is now about training and skills transfer to local staff in our laboratories which will contribute to building capacity and capability in the local health services. These laboratories will over time extend into wider clinical diagnostics as well as having a public health role. I saw this in action for myself at our new extension to the Makeni laboratory. We will also play our part in enhancing emergency preparedness and response at national and local level. This will take at least another two years and literally thousands of lives will be improved. The UK Department for International Development (DFID) is supporting PHE to do this as part of "Resilient Zero", the Sierra Leone Government objective to be ready and on top of any future outbreak of infections like Ebola. DFID and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office have been superb colleagues and critical to keeping our staff safe on the ground. More widely, one of our Brighton anaesthetic trainees – a small world – working for King's Sierra Leone Partnership, has recently, with funding from DFID, helped the main hospital (the largest public hospital in Sierra Leone) to introduce piped oxygen into 4 beds on their ICU – the other 280 beds have none – and has reduced mortality by 30%. Frugal innovation is everywhere as the country begins to recover.

Past success in reducing premature mortality means that 55% of people dying in England are now over eighty years old and the burden of mortality has clearly shifted to older people. [Life expectancy](#) at specific older ages is a telling statistic: for 85 year-olds it is six or seven years, for 95 year-olds it falls to three. These statistics serve to remind us that for older people quality of life is what matters and should be our goal for them too whether as friends and family or in our professional roles. While a good start in life is a lifelong asset, even during mid-life, it is not too late to take steps to improve health and independence in old age. We have been looking more closely at trends in life expectancy at older ages working closely with ONS. Our report last year showed a drop in 2012 but in our latest analysis, published today it has risen again in 2014 to its highest ever level. Although most local authorities showed these same improvements, at least a quarter did not. There is no obvious pattern to this variation and we are being cautious in interpreting it. Death rates in the elderly are unstable from year to year for technical reasons and things like cold weather and flu can have really big effects. We will be following the data closely and have brought in a panel of experts to help us.

And finally, as this is National Heart Month, we are taking the opportunity to highlight the NHS Health Check. [Research](#) we published this week shows a discrepancy between how much men rate their health and what they feel they can do to influence it. Around six out of ten men believe that as they get older their health is going to get worse, regardless of whether they lead a healthy lifestyle. The NHS Health Check encourages people to make healthy choices to reduce their overall cardiovascular risk, which in turn prevents the development of long term health problems. We will continue to support local authorities in their work to increase the number of people taking up a Health Check and in sharing the learning from those most successful, for example Leicester and Rochdale.

With best wishes