
Sustainable healthcare: The Danish model that's streets ahead



Similar to other wealthy developed countries, Denmark is facing challenges from an ageing population with more chronic disease. The problem is aggravated by a younger population whose addiction to fast-food and practice of other unhealthy habits lead to chronic illness.

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What makes Denmark different from its peers is in the way it has transformed its healthcare system, making it financially sustainable for the multiple challenges ahead. Other countries often respond to growing demand for health-related services by building more hospitals along traditional lines. The Danes have long realised "the existing model was broken", and instead focus on delivering as many services as possible through primary healthcare.

"The future role of the hospital is thought of as the place you go to when you finally need highly specialised healthcare services. The philosophy is to handle all other kinds of problems through primary care and add to the stronghold of the GP, municipalities and (outpatient) clinics," according to [Hans Erik Henriksen, CEO of Healthcare DENMARK](#).

Today the GP serves as the gatekeeper of healthcare, concluding nine out of 10 issues that arise. In line with this transformation, the number of hospitals in Denmark has gone down to 32, from 98 back in 1999. A map of speciality hospitals has been drawn up across the country and doctors and the ambulance services know whether the patient should go to specialised orthopaedic, cancer or cardiac hospitals.

The restructuring of the country's hospital system is based on quality and productivity, says [Henriksen](#). "We have learned that if you have hospitals that open the door for any patient and say 'come in, let's see what we can do with you', you will receive patients for whom the hospital may not have the necessary experience," he explained.

Initially, the restructuring was met with strong resistance from both the public and politicians. "Of course, when you close hospitals there is uproar from the local community. In the beginning it was very powerful and politicians backed down," Henriksen points out. "They kept the hospital open but years later the building was there but its role had changed and it may have become a rehabilitation hospital."

Tensions eventually subsided and after a couple of years the public began preferring specialist hospitals. The country's healthcare reform is moving to a new phase, with a budget of \$10.5 billion to develop 16 new super specialised hospitals as the backbone of its future hospital structure.

This phase will see patients as active participants, taking more responsibility for becoming educated about their health, while the system works on making them feel heard.

Denmark's goldmine of electronic data about the population, going back 30 years, has given it a head start. The transformation process is also made easier by the fact that the country's healthcare IT strategy is linked to the public sector IT strategy. Starting in November 2014, for instance, all Danes had to get an electronic mailbox because letters from public authorities would no longer be sent by snail mail.

Henriksen says the elderly have rapidly become online users and one aim was for all Danes to have a doctor in their pocket. This is not smartphone access to Google but an instrument for their digital relationship with their GP.

Crucial to the success of the reform is trust, according to Henriksen, who noted that Denmark has the finest [cyber security](#) in the world.

Source: [The Australian Financial Review](#)

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