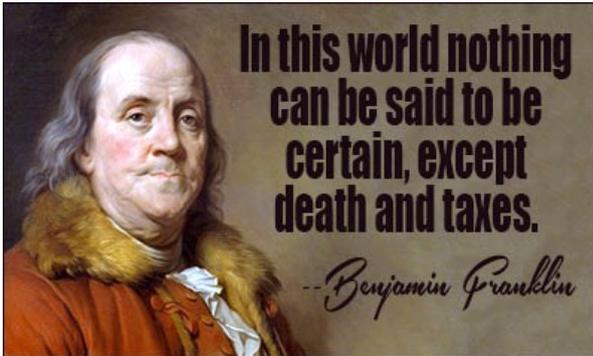


## Is modern health care for everyone?



"In this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes." So said the American scientist and statesman Benjamin Franklin in a letter in 1789, though he wasn't the first to express this opinion. These days we often hear of organisations and people trying to avoid taxes – think of Google, Amazon, and some well-known politicians and sport stars – and there are even those who think they can cheat death by having their bodies deep-frozen in the

hope that unknown future discoveries can bring them back to life. That isn't an option for all of us; it costs a fortune, and I think they're completely wasting their money.

Of course, people on the whole are now living longer than previous generations because of improvements in conditions and advances in health care and medicine. The Queen, herself in her 90s and the longest-reigning monarch of the UK, has been provided with increasing numbers of civil servants to send congratulations to those reaching their 100th birthday. We have lots more pensioners (self included!) and the state pension age is being pushed up. Up and up are also going the costs of health services and care homes, constantly in the news, and our National Health Service is in danger of collapse from financial and other pressures.



The government doesn't have unlimited resources to spend on the NHS, but it also doesn't want to lose support by making unpopular cuts. So hospital waiting times are growing, some treatments will no longer be available on prescription, and there's a shortage of nurses. While medical research, including world-leading work at our own local Newcastle University, develops new ways of dealing with illnesses and life-threatening conditions, these are often expensive and some of them are controversial, such as Newcastle's so-called "three-parent baby" therapy for fighting mitochondrial disease. The NHS faces challenges that are financial, political, and ethical.



So if you were in charge of health policy, what would you decide? Should we pay for a doctor's surgery consultation? Should joint replacements be denied to those over a certain age? Should the NHS charge for treating people whose problems are a direct result of their binge drinking, overeating, smoking, or other harmful lifestyle choices? How should the development of new medical drugs be funded? – remember that pharmaceutical companies are profit-making firms, not charities or public bodies; I've been involved in some of their research, and it can't be done on the cheap.



Who actually makes these decisions, and on what basis? There isn't a simple answer, with many agencies and complex factors involved. It's always difficult to balance demands and priorities that compete with each other. Whatever you think, someone else will have the



opposite opinion; just look at the failure of the US administration in its recent attempt to replace so-called Obamacare because those opposed to it couldn't agree how to go about it. And don't forget that, however much we may worry and complain about the NHS, many countries don't have any kind of national health care system at all, and only those with enough money get help with their medical problems. For the majority in the world, modern health care certainly isn't for everyone.

Although we aren't expecting easy solutions, some of these issues will be addressed in a one-day conference on Saturday 13 May in Kingston Park, Newcastle, which I've organised on behalf of an organisation called *Christians in Science*. The conference title is "**Playing God? Research, ethics and practice in modern medicine**" and there's a range of expert speakers with an opportunity for questions and discussion. It's intended for anyone interested in the topic, not just medical specialists. If you want to know more, and maybe buy a ticket to attend (£25 covers costs and includes lunch), you can visit [cis.org.uk](http://cis.org.uk) or [goo.gl/uKHJCb](http://goo.gl/uKHJCb) on the internet. I hope there may be a free evening event later in the year, somewhere in the Tyne Valley, with a speaker tackling some of these points.



In the meantime, perhaps Benjamin Franklin was right in linking death and taxes: in real life, to fight one, we need the other.

**Bill Clegg**

*Modified version of the article in the Tyne Valley Express for May–June 2017*