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Outgoing NHS Medical Chief Hails Imminent Breakthroughs in Cancer Care

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Cancer treatment in Britain is on the brink of transformative change, according to the outgoing National Medical Director of NHS England, who says new therapies are set to redefine survival rates and patient outcomes.

Professor Sir Stephen Powis, stepping down after six years at the helm of NHS England's clinical leadership, has expressed optimism about the future of oncology. In his final interview before retirement, the 64-year-old clinician told *The Times* that the U.K. is “at the cusp of a golden era” in cancer care, thanks to major advances in immunotherapy, genetic medicine, and early prevention strategies.

“For many cancers now, people should be confident that it’s not a death sentence and that more treatments will become available,” Sir Stephen said, adding that he foresees a future where more people survive cancer and live longer with the disease, as well as greater chances of a cure for certain types.

Central to his outlook is the rise of personalised medicine. Sir Stephen pointed to breakthroughs in understanding cancer genetics, which allow clinicians to target tumours more precisely. Drugs designed to manipulate the body’s immune response, known as immunotherapies, are already changing how some cancers are treated, and he expects these to play an even larger role in the years to come.

He drew comparisons to the transformation in Human Immunodeficiency Virus and Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (HIV/AIDS) care since the 1980s, saying oncology is now going through a similar evolution. Where once cancer was automatically equated with terminal illness, it is increasingly becoming a manageable or curable condition for many patients.

Preventable Cancers

Beyond treatment, Sir Stephen stressed the importance of prevention as a powerful tool. “We can’t prevent all cancers, but there are cancers that we can certainly prevent,” he said, noting the potential for lung cancer to become far less common with continued public health efforts. Targeted screening, smoking cessation campaigns, and early detection technologies will all play a key role.

He believes genetics will lead the next wave of transformation, allowing medicine to be tailored more accurately to each individual. This would mean faster diagnoses, more effective drugs and better outcomes. “Our understanding of how to pinpoint mutations and then match them with the right treatment is rapidly advancing,” he said.

However, while the science holds promise, there are concerns that delivery of care remains inconsistent. Experts from the Royal College of Physicians (RCP), the Royal College of Radiologists (RCR), the U.K. Association of Supportive Care in Cancer (U.K.ASCC), and the Association for Palliative Medicine (APM) have warned of a “postcode lottery” affecting access to urgent cancer care and supportive services. They are calling for immediate investment to ensure no patient is left behind because of where they live.

Sir Stephen acknowledged the broader challenges facing the NHS, particularly the increasing pressure from an ageing population. He noted that the demands placed on the health system, combined with economic strains on younger generations, will require urgent and long-term strategic thinking.

Despite the hurdles, he remains hopeful. As he steps away from the role, his message is clear: the future of cancer treatment in the U.K. is bright, provided that innovation is matched by access, investment, and a system ready to embrace change.