

Stalham 2026 dinner speech – Hugh Pym

Challenges for health and the NHS:

Funding the ever-expanding demand for treatment is one of the biggest challenges facing the NHS, according to the BBC's health editor Hugh Pym.

He told almost 120 members and guests at Stalham Farmers' Club's 2026 annual dinner that the current budget stands at about £242bn or about 10.3pc of the country's GDP.

The NHS is the biggest single employer in England with 1.37 million (full time equivalent) staffs. It also enjoys enormous public backing with 80pc supporting a key policy – treatment free at the point of delivery.

Mr Pym, who joined the BBC in 2001 became the health editor in March 2014. He had started as a trainee on local radio in the west country and sparked much laughter when he revealed that one of very first roles had been as a reporter on agriculture.

Later, he had joined Channel 4 and ITN reporting on business and economics, even co-authoring a book on Gordon Brown's first year as Prime Minister. When he left his economic/ business role to take on the health brief, one friend warned that he would be going into a backwater – and not much chance of reporting on the BBC news channels. "Little did he know," said Mr Pym, as the Covid-19 epidemic struck in 2020.

The health brief became increasingly high profile – reporting on the first nurses' strikes, junior (now resident) doctors' strikes and so.

While the NHS enjoyed huge public support, there was also increasing criticism of many aspects of the NHS – the failure to move fully to electronic prescriptions. Although 96pc were electronic, there were still 40m pieces of paper processed annually at a data centre in the north east. There was irritation too that substantial numbers of letters offering patient appointments arrived after the due date and so.

Mr Pym recognised that there has been progress – for example, waiting lists, while still lengthy, were starting to fall. But there were many other areas of concern – often lengthy delays for some cancer treatments.

He noted too that more people were signed up to the NHS app than had subscriptions to Netflix!

As the son of a GP and a mother who was a veterinary surgeon, Mr Pym said that the health brief was endlessly fascinating.

He had been privileged to interview the first patient in the world to receive the Covid-19 vaccine, and incidentally the second, who was a William Shakespeare, also from

Warwickshire. That report went viral on social media as did another when he was filmed in a park, demonstrating the two-metre rule introduced as part of the Covid-19 precautions. As he stands 6ft 7ins tall – he conformed exactly to the required rule.

Mr Pym also emphasised the growing strains on the NHS and other caring agencies, particularly related to mental health issues. It was a particular challenge for those in the countryside and in the agricultural industry. The opportunity to discuss some of the challenges with a fellow guest, Robin Hepburn, who had become charity director of Norfolk-based YANA (You Are Not Alone) last August was helpful.

However, reporting sensitively, accurately on health issues and without causing alarm was a key thread to responsible reporting for the BBC. He was also awarded the Charles Wheeler Award in 2020 for his coverage of the Covid-19 epidemic.

A keen rugby fan, he admitted that he supported Scotland, partly because of his wife's connections. He had been returning from watching England beat Ireland in Dublin (I won't mention the Calcutta Cup a month earlier) when he was alerted to the latest meningitis B cases in Kent. He had been on a crowded train en route to London from Stansted and then had to report on this latest fatal outbreak.

Later while visiting Kent, he had been impressed by the positive reaction of hundreds of students, who later queued patiently for six hours or more to get medication or vaccination. "And there wasn't a single anti-vaxxer there," he added.

While reporting the news in front of camera and on radio was still a primary function, he was increasingly drawn to more online and social media engagement.

His own experience and understanding of his digestive system and gut health was just one example.

As a result he had modified his diet because it was suggested that his gut health was about five years older than his actual age. His full report can be read – go to BBC indepth, January 13, 2026.

He proposed the toast to Stalham Farmers' Club and Agriculture and was then warmly applauded for his address.

Mr Pym then presented the awards and trophies

The new chairman, Jason Cantrill, thanked the Salhouse Lodge for a superb meal and the guest speaker. He was presented with a signed copy of Henry Blofeld's book and a Stalham Farmers' Club tie with the distinctive design of a swan-necked Stalham hoe and the date of the club's foundation in 1841.

Michael Pollitt March 25, 2026