

# Annex B: Letters

## Letter to Senior Government Officials and Senior Executives in the Health Service

Thank you for the opportunity to advise you and your colleagues on next steps toward a better and safer NHS. It is a privilege to be allowed to assist an organization for which I have such great respect, and it has been a pleasure to work with the talented and committed Advisory Group that you allowed me to assemble.

The full Report represents the unanimous views of the Advisory Group. I wish here to take the liberty of adding some personal comments and reflections for your consideration.

You are stewards of a globally important treasure: the NHS. In its form and mission, guided by the unwavering charter of universal care, accessible to all, and free at the point of service, the NHS is a unique example for all to learn from and emulate. Faults are to be expected in any enterprise of such size and ambition, and, as you know, the nation's leaders have the dual duty to continually, unblinkingly recognize and reduce those faults and at the same time to maintain and build confidence in the grand vision of the NHS.

The Mid Staffordshire tragedy and its sequellae offer the chance to do both. Thanks to Robert Francis, the nation can see directly some important problems, worth solving, not just in Mid Staffordshire but throughout the NHS. Our Report describes some of those problems. Among them are a partial loss of focus on quality and safety as primary aims, inadequate openness to the voices of patients and carers, insufficient skills in safety and improvement, staffing inadequate for patients' needs, and very unhelpful complexity and lack of clarity and cooperation among regulatory agencies. You, as leaders, can help to remedy every one of those problems and the others that we name. I hope and strongly suspect that you will do so.

In trying to achieve remedy, your most certain and productive pathways will be built on the enormous strengths of the NHS – its people, their commitment, its charter, much of its track record, and the affection and wisdom of patients and carers. I hope that you will invest even more than ever before in learning, growth, development, ambition, and pride. This is the route that can make the NHS a "learning organization" in every sense of the term, and it can unleash momentum for improvement that no simple, top-down, control-oriented, requirement-driven culture ever can.

This is not to excuse or ignore the whole story, as Robert Francis and we understand it. Very occasionally at the root of harm do lie willful, reckless behaviors or neglect that cannot be tolerated, any more than reckless driving can be. There is an important role for responsive regulation by experts, enforcement, and consequences in such circumstances. It is equally important to be alert to early warning signs of possible serious quality and safety problems, and to investigate and act on them. Your recent advisors – Robert Francis, Sir Bruce Keogh, and we – do converge in our recommendations for clarity, timeliness, and reliability in taking action when such alarms sound.

But, as I think you know, this – acting on rare and outlying behaviors and on exceptional cases of poor performance – though necessary, will not create an overall far safer and better NHS; it cannot.

A culture of learning can . And the likelihood of such a culture's thriving in the NHS depends, more than on anything else, on how you, the senior leaders, behave, speak, and invest.

This report is longer than I had hoped it would be. We had no choice; the NHS is complex and actors are inescapably interdependent. As you will see, however, we offer one distillation that you may wish to keep in mind as you peruse the whole. These are four guiding principles that, I suggest, should inform every step you take in these matters – in what you think, say, and do:

- Place the quality and safety of patient care above all other aims for the NHS. (This, by the way, is your safest and best route to lower cost.)
- Engage, empower, and hear patients and carers throughout the entire system, and at all times
- Foster wholeheartedly the growth and development of all staff, especially with regard to their ability and opportunity to improve the processes within which they work.
- Insist upon, and model in your own work, thorough and unequivocal transparency, in the service of accountability, trust, and the growth of knowledge.

Time and again in our Group's deliberations, every member used the word "culture" to diagnose both the faults of and the possibilities for the NHS. I urge you to focus on the culture that you want to nurture: buoyant, curious, sharing, open-minded, and ambitious to do even better for patients, carers, communities, and staff pride and joy. If you read our recommendations carefully, and act on them, I believe that you will have set your compass right.

Don Berwick