

Letter to the clinicians, managers, and all staff of the NHS

First of all, thank you. For the nearly three decades that I have been able to observe and work with the NHS, nothing has impressed me more than you – the workforce of 1.3 million people who are trying to make real a vision of a vital, universal health care system, accessible to all, and free at the point of service. Your nation’s commitment to health care as a human right and to healing as a shared mission is second to none in the world. And all of that is possible through you; only through you.

But, it gets rough sometime, doesn’t it? Because you work in a publicly led and publicly funded system of care, you operate under a spotlight more intense than most professional communities ever do. And truth to tell, it doesn’t always go so well. Every experienced clinician knows what it feels like to be involved in an error in care, despite one’s very best efforts. And the abstract concept of a “system” that fails has concrete meaning in the life of every doctor, nurse, or therapist who couldn’t find a crucial test result, became exhausted when staffing was inadequate to meet patients’ needs, or watched a patient get an infection in a hospital.

When things go especially badly, as happened, for example, in Mid Staffordshire, and public and private sentiment heats up, it can feel especially rough. And, at its worst, problems like that can hurt morale, as people lose sight of how great the mission is and of how hard you are trying to do what’s right.

I was asked by Government and your senior leaders to chair an Advisory Group to recommend what can be learned from recent instances of quality problems in the NHS, and how the system can more rapidly and certainly aim for improvements in patient care and safety. The Group comprised scholars with a special interest in health care quality, leaders familiar with the workings of the NHS, and, most important, patient representatives with personal experiences of both excellence and problems in care.

The resulting report represents our best effort at identifying changes that could help the English NHS become even more the effective, safe, and patient-centered system that you who work in the Service want it to be.

We have made numerous recommendations, some of which reflect the need to tighten surveillance of and response to serious problems in care, which need systemic fixes to help protect patients. As you well know, safety in any sector – aviation, roads, or health care – sometimes requires a commitment to reliability and adherence to proper standards. And some standards should be seriously enforced; the risks of not doing that are too great. In addition, when early warning signs from patients, carers, staff, or data suggest a possibility that serious problems exist in quality and safety, the Government and leaders of the NHS are duty-bound to investigate, reach sound conclusions, and take prompt action.

But, as you probably also know, real, sustainable, active improvement depends far more on learning and growth than on rules and regulations. And that is the balance we are suggesting that the NHS seek to strike – between the hard guardrails that keep things in proper order and the culture of continual learning that helps everyone to grow. A phrase that I believe I heard first in England captures that sense: “All Teach – All Learn.” In such a culture, measurement is not a threat, it is a resource; ambition is not stressful, it is exciting; defects are seen as opportunities to learn; and curiosity abounds.

We are recommending four guiding principles, among others, to help the English NHS get better faster, and I urge you to think about these and ask how you can help incorporate them into your own daily work.

- 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.

Our Group is urging leaders and the public at large to study, grasp, and act on these ideas, as well. We would hope to see the English NHS emerge as a vital “learning organization,” with you, who work in and for it, experiencing pride and joy in pursuing the great mission you have chosen: to heal.

Don Berwick