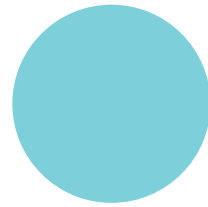


An open letter to the Secretary of State for Health from Jocelyn Cornwell,
Chief Executive of The Point of Care Foundation



The
Point of Care
Foundation

11-13 Cavendish Square
London, W1G 0AN

The Rt Hon Jeremy Hunt MP
The Secretary of State for Health
House of Commons
London, SW1A 0AA

May, 2015

Dear Secretary of State

Re: Keeping compassion and respect for patients a top priority

Congratulations on your reappointment to this important office.

I'm writing out of concern that the urgent priorities competing for your attention may cause the vital issue of treating patients with compassion and respect to slip down the agenda. This would be profoundly damaging.

Modern healthcare can be dehumanising. The volume of activity and sheer numbers of people, with staff and patients interacting in settings that are industrial in scale, can cause staff and patients to feel like cogs in the system. For staff, this means they can become disengaged from the human aspect of their work. For patients and carers, it puts compassion and respect at risk.

Compassion matters. For patients, indifferent, insensitive and impersonal care is detrimental to healing and hinders self management. It slows recovery and affects clinical outcomes negatively. Improving patient experience is the right thing to do but it also makes sense clinically and financially.

The NHS is in a relatively good place in spite of the challenges. Most patients are satisfied with their treatment, most of the time, when surveyed. But we also know that high levels of overall satisfaction mask variability in quality between and within organisations. With the experience of patients at Mid Staffordshire NHS Foundation Trust, Winterbourne View and Morecombe Bay fresh in our minds, we cannot afford to ignore how seriously people suffer when compassion is not a core organisational value and deeply engrained in all staff.

As Secretary of State you cannot be responsible for ensuring the quality of care everywhere, all of the time – that is the responsibility of staff working at the frontline – but you can influence the environment at the sharp end of care in certain important respects.

We believe there are actions you and your government can take which will help to create the positive environment in which support for NHS staff and compassionate care can flourish.

1. Articulate the importance of compassionate care

The benefit you and others at a national level can bring by championing compassionate care in all healthcare settings, all the time, cannot be understated. You can set the tone of the national debate about the priorities and performance of the NHS and foster a more appreciative environment, focussing often on what the service does well and on improvements that are happening. Talk of service failure can be profoundly demoralising and demotivating; it can undermine efforts at improvement unless it is balanced with support, encouragement and the resources to get things right.

Communicate through your actions as well as your words that you value the work of healthcare staff highly, in particular their ability to provide comfort and support to people who are ill or in need of care. Praise and reward the doctors and nurses, the porters, receptionists, healthcare assistants, cleaners and others who play a very important part in patient experience. Reaffirm that the work that all staff do in listening and responding to patients and carers makes a real and significant difference to patients' quality of life and their ability to recover physically and emotionally.

2. Enable NHS organisations to put patients and their families first

The regulatory and performance management regimes are necessary for the protection of patients and the maintenance of transparency. However, if managers are to focus on their core work of supporting staff to deliver excellent patient care, the burden of regulation and assessment needs to be restricted to what really matters. We would like to see senior and middle managers spending more time with patients and staff, focussing on operational problems and supporting improvement activity.

You can help by resisting attempts to make regulation more onerous and requiring regulators to work more effectively together, sharing information, definitions, reports and measures.

Patients and their families bring rich insight into services that work well and where, often with relatively small changes, they can work better. If we want the NHS to improve, listening to patients and families and working in partnership with them as equals, is critically important.

Patient feedback is important, and you can help by insisting organisations focus less on gathering more data, and more on using it for improvement.

3. Enable NHS organisations to support and engage more effectively with front line staff

NHS staff are under considerable stress. Organisational change, the pressure of limited resources and the inherent challenge of working with people who are ill, dependent or dying all impact on their health and well-being. In the annual NHS Staff Survey (2014), nearly 40% said they had suffered from workplace

stress in the past 12 months. Work related ill-health due to stress in the health sector is significantly above the average for all industries. When staff experience stress, they are less able to respond to patients positively with compassion, kindness and empathy.

The message from the Boorman (2009), Berwick (2013) and most recent Francis (2015) reports is clear: more support and engagement with staff is needed if we want to improve the NHS and have a positive culture focussed squarely on high quality patient care. Supporting staff, and creating and sustaining a positive culture, particularly in times of financial stringency, takes continuous focus and time. Yet the average NHS chief executive spends less than two years in post. The “heads must roll” response to failure undermines efforts to change culture, improve performance and learn from mistakes. At its worst, it contributes to a culture of bullying. There needs to be space for blame free and effective reflection on what goes wrong and what goes right to enable learning to take place.

Supporting healthcare organisations to deliver compassionate care sometimes does mean putting more resources and more people into the front line of care. But sometimes other types of resource are needed – stable leadership, supportive managers, training and good systems for staff evaluation, reflective practice and appraisal.

While gathering data about staff experience is important, focus NHS organisations more on how they can demonstrate that they are involving patients and staff in problem-solving and acting on their feedback. You can help by recognising the importance of staff engagement and support by establishing an unrestricted ‘staff engagement and support’ fund for organisations to use as they judge best, provided they can demonstrate that staff are more engaged and supported as a result.

While compassion in care is delivered everyday in interactions between staff and patients at the front line of care, your actions are important. You can set the tone of discussion about the NHS, reinforce a positive culture, set a clear vision and ensure staff have the practical support that is needed.

We have been working with frontline staff and leaders for many years and are deeply immersed in the evidence of what works.

I would be very happy to provide more information about our work and the evidence that underpins it and to help in any way that I can to promote compassionate care for all patients.

Yours sincerely



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cc. Parliamentarians
 National statutory bodies and leaders working in healthcare

About us

The Point of Care Foundation is an independent charity working to improve patients' experience of care and increase support for the staff who work with them.

We provide evidence and resources to support health and care staff in the valuable work of caring for patients.

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