

Nursing is a privilege, not just a tick in a box

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A ‘culture of care’ starts with hands-on experience. That will help prevent another Mid Staffs

The Government has been courageous. Ministers have admitted that something has gone seriously wrong with nursing in this country and they are now confronting the problem.

The Francis report has revealed in awful detail the harrowing neglect that took place in Mid Staffordshire, where maybe as many as 1,200 patients died because of poor care. But that cannot be dismissed as an isolated incident. After the Labour MP Ann Clwyd stood up in the Commons to describe the callous treatment of her dying husband on an NHS ward, her office was inundated with other personal tales of terrible experiences from up and down the country.

Jeremy Hunt, the Health Secretary, yesterday said that he wanted to embed a “culture of care” in the health service. One of his key proposals is that aspiring nurses should work for up to a year as a healthcare assistant or support worker before they can apply to become a nurse.

In the rush to give nursing degree status the emphasis over the past generation swung in favour of seminars and textbooks and against bedpans, feeding and hands-on care. So the Government’s overhaul of training is a step in the right direction.

It is right to expect nurses to know about hands-on caring before they enter degree-level training. Those who do not like what that entails — washing patients, feeding them and, just as importantly, listening to them — should be weeded out. Working as a care assistant is an opportunity for would-be nurses to find out if they can handle it. I hope the Royal College of Nursing will back these changes and decide whether it wants to be a professional body concerned with fighting for standards or a union.

Frontline experience in care will be a good foundation for professional nursing, but it must not be used as an excuse to increase the number of cheaper healthcare assistants. New entrants will need supervision and training. They need excellent role models and must feel supported and uninhibited in providing good care. A compassionate attitude costs nothing.

The Francis report recommended that healthcare assistants be registered, but the Government is sceptical. Registration will not solve bad attitudes or drive up standards. Healthcare is already an industry drowning under protocols, guidelines and procedures. It was not just the wrong kind of training that led to Mid Staffs. Excessive bureaucracy helped to push caring out of the wards.

In an attempt to improve standards and increase accountability, too much emphasis was put on form-filling. Yes, it is important to document events, data such as temperature or blood

pressure, or summarise conversations. But another much more important dimension is difficult to record. The subtle changes in a patient — less steady walking, looking paler or sweaty, a parched mouth — are only detected by good hands-on care. But these important signs are only detected when nurses spend time observing patients rather than checking machines and know the significance of the changes.

I believe that ministers understand that the bureaucratic demands of form-filling get in the way of caring.

If they can reduce the great piles of paperwork, then compassion can return to the wards.

But this crisis in care is not just about the health service. Fifteen per cent of the workforce in Wales work in health and social care. They are members of society just like you and are influenced day in, day out by the attitudes around them. And those social attitudes see the elderly as a burden and the ill as a financial drain. Little wonder then that a “better off dead” attitude has spilt over into some hospitals.

Our attitudes need to change at every level. To care for another should be regarded as a privilege, not a burden. Caring is everyone’s business and society cannot just leave it to professionals to do. Embedding that culture of compassionate care is not easy. But here is a simple test for anyone looking after a patient: “Is this good enough for my nearest and dearest?” If it is not, then it is not good enough for others.

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